

Kooris, Ghubbas and Others: Cross-Cultural Collaboration in the Work of Aboriginal Leader Mollie Dyer

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Abstract: Mollie Dyer, Aboriginal leader, mother of six and foster mother of 19, devoted her career to caring for Aboriginal children. In this chapter, I examine cross-cultural collaboration in her activities, with a particular focus on the 1970s, when she was instrumental in the creation of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. I find that Mollie was not afraid to draw on white support to further her work for Aboriginal communities, but, despite this, maintained a determination to see Aboriginal organisations be led by Aboriginal people.

Keywords: Mollie Dyer, Aboriginal women, Aboriginal leader, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

In her autobiography, *Room for One More*, the Aboriginal leader, Mollie Dyer, used a vivid analogy to describe the cross-cultural nature of her childhood. Describing her early years, spent moving between Melbourne, the Aboriginal station Cummeragunja¹ and her white grandparents' apple orchard at Hastings in Western Port Bay, Mollie wrote:

The fragrances of the flowers in the garden tended lovingly by my grandmother and aunts filled the air with a soft beauty. But the bush flowers gave off their own scent that haunted me as well. I was a child of the bush and a child of the farm simultaneously.²

This childhood amongst both white and black communities proved useful later on: 'To this day under most circumstances I can feel at ease with either white groups or Aboriginal groups'.³

Mollie's experiences in cross-cultural collaboration are the focus of this chapter, particularly those relating to her work during the 1970s. A prominent Aboriginal activist and leader, Mollie played a crucial role in improving Aboriginal child welfare through the creation of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). But Mollie did not carry out this work in a vacuum; she worked in conjunction with other Aboriginal people as well as

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with white people to achieve her aims, and it is her relationships with this latter group that I will explore in this chapter through a study of her autobiography.⁴ I begin with a short overview of Mollie's life. I then turn to Mollie's increasing political awareness and interest in social welfare and her work in the 1970s. I finish with a consideration of how Mollie's work has been remembered.

Mollie Dyer was born in 1927 to a white father, Philip Tucker, and an Aboriginal mother, Margaret Tucker, herself a prominent figure in Aboriginal activism for many years. White authorities took Margaret from her mother as a girl and this experience helped to direct Mollie's own interest in the treatment of Aboriginal children. Indeed, this incident was so important to Mollie that accounts of it from her mother and from her grandmother, Theresa Clements, serve as an introduction to her autobiography, the contradictory nature of the government's 'protection' policies setting the context for her recollections.⁵ Wrote Mollie: 'My mother, along with her sister May, were removed from their family under those policies'.⁶ Mollie spent much of her early life with Philip Tucker's family, initially in Hawthorn and later on the family's apple orchard at Hastings. Her father was absent pursuing job opportunities elsewhere in the country while her mother stayed in Melbourne, where, in the words of Mollie, 'she could use her wages to support the growing campaign for justice and better conditions for Aborigines'.⁷ Mollie held fond memories of her childhood with her grandparents, whom she called Mum and Percy, noting she was lucky compared to other Aboriginal children separated from their parents:

Although my grandparents had difficulty coming to terms with their son's marriage, I never felt any conflict. They were honest people who never denied Mum access to me and, in fact, encouraged her to take me at weekends and for holidays.⁸

But she still felt her parents' absence: 'that separation from my mother and father was to have a profound effect on me in later years'.⁹

Mollie was educated at the Abbotsford convent, where her high achievements were used to show other children they were not trying hard enough. At the time, Mollie did not feel the sting of the backhanded compliment. 'I felt proud when my teachers would indicate that the other children were not trying hard enough when a little Aborigine got better results. As I grew older, it dawned on me that although unintentional such comments did have racial connotations'.¹⁰ Many of Mollie's holidays from the convent were spent on Cummeragunja, where she recalled children played freely despite the

hardships felt by their parents, who battled autocratic managers, poor food rations and unfair working arrangements.¹¹ Mollie did not see much of her Aboriginal grandmother, Theresa Clements, who, she later reflected, could have told her much about her background. Even when Mollie was older and Theresa came to stay, Mollie was unreceptive to her stories: ‘Sadly I had been so conditioned that *living white* was the only way to go that I rejected her request that I write her story’.¹²

On her twentieth birthday, Mollie married Alan Burns, with whom she was to have six children between 1948 and 1959: Alan, Daryl, Rodney, Maxine, Barbara and Selwyn. The marriage was not a happy one and, in 1963, she left her abusive husband. Twelve years later, Mollie married her long-term partner, Charlie Dyer. Like Alan Burns, he was not Aboriginal. Charlie worked with Mollie to care for Aboriginal children and supported her political endeavours, which I will discuss further shortly. Throughout her life, Mollie fostered nineteen children. She died in 1998.

Despite her mother’s political activities, Mollie was not initially interested in Aboriginal issues. She said both her Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families made her feel special: ‘Rather than being a person in the middle with no identity I was, in a way, twice blessed’.¹³ Mollie’s identification with both Aboriginal and white communities, however, had its complications. During her education at the Abbotsford convent, Mollie admitted she began to internalise some of the common racist sentiments. She recalled: ‘over the next fifteen years I did begin to feel superior to my Koori brothers and sisters’.¹⁴ This tendency, however, was checked by Margaret’s continued activism, which Mollie claimed ‘led me to the reality of what being an Aborigine really meant’.¹⁵ A particular wake-up call occurred in the late 1950s when a wallet went missing from a laboratory where Mollie and her mother worked as cleaners. Police searched their home and took Margaret in for questioning. Later, it emerged that a night watchman had spotted the wallet and taken it ready to hand in the next morning. Despite the apologies that followed, Mollie and Margaret resigned their positions. Mollie observed that this was just one of many incidents that occurred during this time to convince her ‘that Kooris had a struggle to overcome racism’.¹⁶ She wrote: ‘Despite all our attempts to fit in and try to contribute positively to the society we lived in, we were still made to feel like second class citizens’.¹⁷

Mollie welcomed the creation of the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) in 1957, noting that it helped Kooris keep up-to-date with the political issues that concerned them and on the finer points of dealing with white authorities. ‘We learned a lot from the white members of the League about

communicating and negotiating with the various bureaucracies', Mollie observed.¹⁸ This knowledge gave Aboriginal people the confidence to demand greater control over their lives. She wrote: 'we fast emerged from being stereotyped and subservient mission blacks to a group of people no longer prepared to succumb to the genocide policies of assimilation'.¹⁹ She continued: 'We wanted to determine what was in our own best interest and not have others make decisions based on paternalism and bureaucratic authoritarianism in which we had no voice'.²⁰ Mollie recalled that by 1963, real improvements could be seen:

The National Aboriginal Day Observance Committee had appointed Uncle Doug Nicholls a member of the Committee. Kooris, as a result, became more interested and soon, instead of just a pleasant Sunday afternoon ... activities were spread over a weekend with a gala ball.²¹

Mollie's involvement with the AAL varied, depending on the pressures of child rearing and, at times, earning enough to survive. By 1966, however, she had resumed active work with the AAL, and now that it had enough members to staff its committees, Mollie could choose to focus on what concerned her most—welfare issues. She noted that Koori women were at this time 'emerging as a force to be reckoned with', and that most, like her, concentrated on Aboriginal welfare.²² According to Mollie, this made sense, given that the main responsibility for raising families fell largely to women. 'Women also had first-hand knowledge and experience of what was required to restore pride and dignity to Koori families', she added.²³ In July 1966, Margaret Tucker returned home from a trip to New Zealand and the Philippines and brought together a group of Aboriginal women keen to support the AAL's efforts in Aboriginal welfare.²⁴ The group grew and soon split into three in order to focus more closely on particular areas of welfare—the National Council of Aboriginal and Island Women, the United Council of Aboriginal Women and a third group focused on homeless and transient people.²⁵ Without funding, the bulk of the work fell to, in the words of Mollie, 'a few "diehards"', who quickly became familiar with the operations of government bureaucracies.²⁶ Already accustomed to approaching the departments from the outside, they focused now on learning to deal with them 'from the inside'.²⁷

Increasingly, Aboriginal people were taking control of the AAL, a phenomenon to which some of the older Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal activists found adjustment difficult. For Mollie, this tension played out in her relationship with her mother, whom she found to be sending her 'mixed messages', on the one hand supporting these moves towards self

determination, but on the other also feeling ‘sad that some of the good white people who had helped us in the past were feeling slighted’.²⁸ Mollie observed: ‘It was not an easy task trying to undo the condition of the protection and assimilation policies’.²⁹ This attitude led Tucker to defend white people who had cared for Aboriginal children but, at the same time, to urge Mollie and others to prevent further removals by providing support for Koori families struggling to cope.³⁰ According to Mollie, however, there was never any question of where Tucker’s true sympathies lay: ‘She would never defend whites against Kooris’.³¹

Aboriginal self-determination appeared to receive a further boost in 1968 when Victoria’s Aboriginal Welfare Board was axed and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs created.³² Certainly, the new director of the department, Reg Worthy, appeared to be making all the right moves, speaking regularly with Aboriginal people and even setting aside one afternoon a month to speak to Aboriginal women. ‘We felt it was not just another attempt to placate us’, Mollie wrote.³³ However, Worthy’s ambitious claim during one meeting that he would ‘get to know and understand every Koori man, woman and child in Victoria’, met immediate scepticism, Aboriginal activist Eric Onus responding: ‘With respect, Sir. I have been an Aborigine for more than forty years and personally know all my people. But I am yet to understand the buggers’.³⁴ Worthy helped the Aboriginal women’s councils lease a building three doors down from the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in Melbourne’s King Street, offering to equip the offices for the groups, providing they agreed to work together. The women agreed and the building was named Aboriginal House.³⁵ The first year was successful but the second year a struggle; the women had not realised the assistance they received was a one-off grant: ‘We battled on for a while but without telephones and sometimes electricity we were forced to move out’.³⁶ Their work continued, nevertheless.

Help from white authorities, then, proved to be a double-edged sword. This was shown to be particularly true when, some time later, Mollie and her future husband, Charlie, applied for a Viable Enterprise Fund loan available to Kooris to establish a business—in their case, making and selling garden ornaments. Worthy called them in for a meeting. ‘I began to wonder what involvement the Director had with the Viable Enterprise Fund’, recalled Mollie. She soon realised their application depended on his approval. ‘I was to find out that despite the Ministry’s policy of self-determination, Big Brother was still looking over our shoulder to see we did it right’.³⁷ During a second meeting, Worthy presented Mollie with a proposal—he would approve the business proposal if she would come and work for the Department as a secretary. Upon consideration, she refused because ‘I would not be master of

my own soul'.³⁸ Worthy did not take kindly to the news, receiving it with a 'vituperative outburst' and a warning 'never to expect any help from him in the future'.³⁹ The business proposal was rejected. Mollie reflected that general Koori opinion regarding Worthy was conflicted: 'While some Kooris believed the Director to be God's gift to Kooris, others disliked him intensely'.⁴⁰

By the early 1970s, the league had begun to wind down its national involvement and Aboriginal people became, in Mollie's words, 'increasingly active in their own states'.⁴¹ According to Richard Broome's research into the role of white supporters in the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League branches, for the first fifteen years of its existence, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people worked together 'to create racial harmony', just as Aboriginal leader Sir Doug Nicholls had initially hoped.⁴² However, while white volunteers were crucial in gaining popular white support for Aboriginal autonomy in the 1970s, this autonomy undermined their own role within the league.⁴³ While many 'accepted this was the moment for which they had been working', for others it 'came too quickly and too controversially', Broome observed.⁴⁴ Ultimately, the adoption of the philosophy of black power left no role for white supporters and the branches folded. At this point, 'It was up to Aboriginal people to carry the League forward in their own way'.⁴⁵ Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus chart a similar process with regard to the Federal Council for Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) from the late 1960s, which led to a split in the organisation.⁴⁶ Increasingly, Aboriginal people, influenced by the black power movement in the United States, criticised older Aboriginal people and groups like FCAATSI, 'both for their alliances with whites and for being too moderate'.⁴⁷

Despite plenty of cause for optimism, particularly with the creation of the federal Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in 1969 and the coming to power of Gough Whitlam's Labor government in 1972, improvements in Aboriginal politics did not pan out as many had hoped. 'Pre-election promises of the Labor Party should have provided realistic funding to facilitate growth, development, self-determination and self-management', Mollie observed. Instead:

We ended up with Big Brother subtly controlling any self-determination that the Ministry thought was appropriate. We did have a better chance to progress but without some form of land rights and an economic base we were still being manipulated into a form of institutionalised dependency on government funding. Our minders were still with us in a different form.⁴⁸

Markus and Attwood have agreed, judging that the federal government's approach to Aboriginal issues after Whitlam's election in 1972 was a disappointment to many; the plethora of new programs for Aboriginal people struggled to bring real results and the mantra of self-determination failed to transfer power to Aboriginal people.⁴⁹ The split, moreover, between white and black in the major Aboriginal lobby groups, such as the AAL and FCAATSI, hampered the organising power of the Aboriginal rights struggle.⁵⁰

Despite Mollie's experiences with Reg Worthy and her support for Aboriginal self-determination, she continued to demonstrate a willingness to work with white people for the benefit of Aboriginal communities. One instance of this occurred when Mollie befriended a Department of Social Welfare representative named Shirley. Their introduction came about when Mollie's care of a nine-year-old relative caught the attention of the department. The girl was to be taken from Mollie as the department had not assessed her to provide foster care.⁵¹ Shirley visited Mollie 'unofficially', explaining she wanted to help. After much discussion, Shirley put a hold on the girl's removal and successfully challenged the order. 'Shirley became a friend', observed Mollie. 'She was honestly interested in our efforts to prevent removal of our children ... The first time I heard the term "stolen children" was when Shirley used it'.⁵²

It was owing to these strong links to Shirley and other sympathetic members of the Social Welfare Department that the AAL decided to charge Mollie in 1972 with 'doing something about' Aboriginal children being returned to care after being taken in by white families. Mollie recalled an initial reluctance on her part, noting she was 'bullied' into contacting the family welfare director, Edith Bennett. Mollie's initial apprehensions did not dissipate immediately, although Bennett's response was positive. She recalled that in the beginning she 'felt somewhat inadequate alongside the people with paper qualifications' but that she quickly developed more confidence.⁵³ 'I soon realised that we Kooris had some solutions', she observed.⁵⁴ Mollie and others began assessing children who were returned to see if they were interested in meeting their biological parents and if these parents wanted their children back. Mollie had no patience with those who questioned why Aboriginal parents might not want their children returned, asking them in response: 'How would you feel about having a beautiful baby ripped from you, only to be asked to take back an emotionally disturbed and screwed-up teenager who did not know you, nor did you know?'⁵⁵ She also understood the hesitancy of children being confronted for the first time by the knowledge that they were Aboriginal. 'They had been told their birth families had rejected them', Mollie wrote.

‘The only families many knew were their white families and now they had rejected them too.’⁵⁶

Despite Mollie’s generally good relationship with the Social Welfare Department, her dealings with its representatives were at times challenging. Early in her role, Mollie insisted that at least one Aboriginal person be involved in ‘every assessment process that could result in the placement of an Aboriginal child’.⁵⁷ Not only did the department refuse this request, it was also reluctant to consider the Koori families that Mollie recommended, insisting that those interested in fostering a child must contact the department of their own accord. When the department did take into account Aboriginal recommendations, it refused to pass on wardship payments, arguing it had not assessed the families identified by Mollie as suitable for fostering or adoption.⁵⁸ Mollie fought the decision and won a concession—a non-parental payment would be paid to Aboriginal carers. Of this compromise, she wrote: ‘This gave me a playing field to work from rather than being thrown out of the game’.⁵⁹ Mollie used this strategy regularly during her work in Aboriginal affairs, giving one government representative cause to describe her some years later as ‘the greatest manipulator he had ever dealt with’. ‘He said I always went away acting quite satisfied only to return time and time again until I had what I asked for in the first place.’⁶⁰

Despite her activities, Mollie did not yet feel ready to take on a public role as leader. When in 1973 she was invited to join a steering committee to help set up the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, a national Aboriginal body to advise the minister for Aboriginal affairs, she declined, feeling she did not have sufficient expertise.⁶¹ She reflected that, while it might have been a chance to lobby nationally on the issue of stolen children, at the time she ‘did not see it that way’.⁶² Mollie and Charlie remained involved, nevertheless, and, when it came time to elect members of the NACC, they were among a number of people familiar with Aboriginal families across the state sent out to distribute ballot papers and collect votes, and to enrol those Aboriginal people not already on the list. Assigned to the Gippsland region in eastern Victoria, Mollie and Charlie were confronted with Aboriginal families, many of whom were unaware of the elections, living in ‘poverty and depressing conditions’.⁶³ They reported their findings to Stewart Murray from the AAL, an Aboriginal man Mollie described as ‘a tireless worker for Kooris battling to survive oppression’ who was ‘fearless in his criticism of those he saw responsible for that oppression, whether they were black or white’.⁶⁴

The AAL lost funding that same year and Mollie was offered a position at the newly formed Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), based on a recommendation

from Stewart Murray. While she was prepared to continue without pay at the AAL, Stewart recommended she take up the legal service position, telling her the service needed a good secretary.⁶⁵ ‘He also felt that I could make a contribution in supporting staff with the increasing numbers of Care and Protection applications coming through the courts’, recalled Mollie.⁶⁶ In 1974, the service set up a hostel for temporary accommodation for Aboriginal people visiting Melbourne and as an alternative to prison. Mollie and Charlie offered their services at weekends.⁶⁷ A year later, Mollie was appointed acting executive officer of the ALS and Charlie hostel manager.⁶⁸

In 1976, Mollie attended an Australian adoption conference, which raised the idea of an Aboriginal Child Care Agency (ACCA), later the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), created by the ALS. During the conference, Mollie appeared on television asking a visiting US social worker whether Aboriginal people should be involved in decisions regarding Aboriginal children. A number of white parents who had adopted Aboriginal children watched the program with anxiety and subsequently contacted Mollie to find out if their children would be taken from them.⁶⁹ Mollie and a supporter of her work, Preston social welfare officer Bernadette Dawson, met and reassured the parents that it had never been the intention ‘to take all our children back’ but, rather, to find out why children who had been fostered or adopted were having problems.⁷⁰ A group was created, made up of white parents keen ‘for their Aboriginal children to be able to identify positively with Aborigines and to have a good feeling of their own self-worth’ whom Mollie would continue to work with.⁷¹ They came up with the ‘effective but monstrous name, the Ghubbariginals’, based on the Aboriginal word for white people, ‘Ghubbas’, which Mollie admitted could have positive and negative connotations. ‘In this group, the term ‘Ghubba’ was used with great affection’, she wrote. While some Ghubbariginals asked Mollie and Bernadette to trace their children’s biological parents, both women refused unless they could be assured it was in the child’s best interests.⁷²

In June 1976, Mollie set off on a study tour of North America that took her across the continent investigating programs that could benefit Australia’s Aboriginal children. It was a daunting trip for Mollie, who felt as she passed through Tullamarine ‘like a prisoner going to her execution’.⁷³ Looking out of the aircraft, however, she caught sight of her send-off party: ‘All I could see was an ocean of black faces and waving arms’.⁷⁴ She managed to pick out Tucker from the crowd: ‘I thought to myself, “This is for you, Mum”’.⁷⁵ During her tour of North America, Mollie participated in a workshop in a Jewish hospital in Ohio on adolescents in long-term foster care and was struck by what she witnessed. ‘Back home we had been trying to convince social

workers that the qualifications were not necessarily a substitute for community knowledge and common sense decisions based on experience', she observed. Now in Ohio, she recorded and transcribed each session, convinced that much of what she was seeing there applied just as much to her own work in Australia.⁷⁶ The highlight of her long journey, however, was a visit to the Yakima people, located in the US state of Washington. 'After my long journey it was here, at the end of it, that I would find the program that I had been searching for', wrote Dyer.⁷⁷ Using a focus on supporting families before serious problems developed, the KUNAK-WE-SHAW (caring place) program had reduced the number of Native American children removed from their families from an average of 35 each year to zero in its first year of operation.⁷⁸ Upon her return, Mollie wrote up a report detailing her findings, later published by the federal Department of Education.⁷⁹

The following year, 1977, Mollie successfully recommended that the director of the Ohio program, Maxine Robbins, be invited as an international guest during Children's Week, a move that was to provide a much-needed boost to the fledgling ACCA. Despite Robbins' anxiety over educating white communities about Aboriginal children—she felt this was a job for Australian Aboriginal people—she agreed to a series of meetings around the state for this purpose.⁸⁰ According to Mollie, 'Maxine's skill rose like cream to the top'. In one workshop that included Aboriginal people at Morwell, she drew out local stories of Aboriginal struggles with white culture. 'Later when summing up Children's Week, the Committee acclaimed the seminar in Morwell as the most interesting and enlightening of all', observed Mollie.⁸¹ As well as interest from the community, Robbins attracted the attention of Canberra-based Aboriginal Legal Services co-ordinator Daryl Gunter, also visiting at this time. Gunter and Robbins spoke at length and, within a few days, both Maxine and Mollie were flown to Canberra to meet with the minister for Aboriginal affairs, Ian Viner. Their subsequent conversation with Viner was convincing; a short time later, official approval for ACAA was secured, with funding to come through the Office of Child Care. In response to pressure from Mollie, this arrangement changed to direct funding to ACCA.⁸²

On their first day of funded activity, Mollie recalled ACCA staff began a meeting in which they were to discuss 'basic issues, strategies and prepar[e] planning strategies'.⁸³ At 10am, a solicitor from the ALS arrived with an Aboriginal mother and child. 'We never did finish that first meeting', recalled Mollie. 'After that there was a never-ending stream of people coming in for assistance, advice and support'.⁸⁴ In 1978, the Department of Social Welfare recognised ACCA as 'the official voice of the Aboriginal community on child

welfare matters'.⁸⁵ Mollie published a number of articles on Aboriginal child welfare during these years.⁸⁶

While still supportive of ACCA's role, Mollie began to resent the increasing professionalisation of its staff, whom she saw as less representative of Koori communities and more reminiscent of the white dominance of Aboriginal affairs of earlier years.⁸⁷ 'When we began this work I had to cope with white professionals questioning Koori qualifications, now we had Aboriginal professionals doing the same thing', she observed.⁸⁸ She felt undermined by these Koori professionals, against whom she believed she 'had no valid argument to back up my Koori instincts'.⁸⁹ As time went on, she became more disillusioned: 'More emphasis was being placed on paper qualifications and the ability to fill in the bureaucratic forms correctly than on the ability to relate to the families in crisis'.⁹⁰ Although she still felt 'optimistic' about ACCA's future, she felt 'we were replacing the white welfare syndrome with the black welfare syndrome'.⁹¹ She resigned her paid position with ACCA in 1980, relieved to step away from what had become a stressful situation for her. But she was careful to point out she did not harbour ill feeling towards the organisation, commenting: 'I sincerely hoped that ACCA would continue to be effective in its work'.⁹² Not long after this, she took up a position as one of the first seven community development officers stationed in regional Victoria to support the Aboriginal co-operatives across the state, which were overseen by Community Services Victoria and the newly created Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Committee Association Limited (VASCAL).⁹³ So began yet another busy chapter in Mollie's life.

Mollie Dyer died after a long illness in 1998 but not before her work had been recognised by the broader community. In 1979, she was awarded Order of Australia and Year of the Child medals, as well as an Advance Australia Award. Discussing her reluctance to accept awards, she wrote that friends convinced her that 'it gave credibility to ACCA and other endeavours [she] had been involved in'.⁹⁴ She continued: 'I accepted them acknowledging that I did so on behalf of all the people, Koori and non-Koori, who were part of the achievements'.⁹⁵ The year before she died, the new centre for VACCA was named Mollie Dyer House.⁹⁶ In 1995, the Dyer family was awarded an International Year of the Family Award for services to children and families.⁹⁷

Before her death, Mollie sent a handwritten manuscript of her autobiography to an American sociologist and friend, Robert Guthrie, in Scotland. Guthrie typed up Mollie's manuscript with minimal editing.⁹⁸ Aboriginal Affairs Victoria published it in 2003, using a title she herself had suggested in the text. Marking the publication of *Room for One More*, then Aboriginal Affairs

Minister Gavin Jennings issued a press release entitled ‘The Inspirational Life of Koorie Activist Mollie Dyer’. In this, he described Mollie as ‘an amazing, courageous woman whose compassion and generosity touched the lives of many people’. ‘Ms Dyer was a powerful leader in the Aboriginal community and a role model for all Victorians.’⁹⁹

This overview of Mollie Dyer’s work during the 1970s reveals that she was indeed a powerful leader, who made the most of whatever assistance—be it from black or white people—she could find in improving the lives of Aboriginal children. Mollie’s childhood included significant time in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and this experience aided her later work. She drew on a breadth of expertise, including contacts made on her overseas trip to North America, but continued to maintain that Aboriginal people should direct Aboriginal organisations. Yet, while Mollie fought for Aboriginal self-determination throughout her political career, she watched with increasing disappointment as white professionalisation crept into Aboriginal roles within Aboriginal organisations, most significantly VACCA, which she had helped found. Regardless of any disappointment she may have felt regarding the new direction of Aboriginal activism, Mollie Dyer left a remarkable legacy in her work and her clever use of cross-cultural collaboration to help change the nature of Aboriginal child welfare in Victoria.

¹ For more on Cummeragunja, see Fiona Davis, ‘Colouring within the Lines: Settler Colonialism and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Station, 1888–1960s’ (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010.)

² Mollie G. Dyer, *Room for One More: The Life of Mollie Dyer* (Melbourne: Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, 2003), 10.

³ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 12.

⁴ For more on considering Aboriginal autobiographies, see Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan, ‘Introduction’, in *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand*, eds Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), xi–xvii; Tim Rowse, ‘Public Occasions, Indigenous Selves: Three Ngarrindjeri Autobiographies’, *Aboriginal History* 30 (2006): 187–207; and Jeremy Beckett, ‘Autobiography and Testimonial Discourse in Myles Lalor’s “Oral History”’, in Attwood and McGowan (eds), 99–122.

⁵ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 7–9. See Therese Clements, *From Old Maloga: The Memoirs of an Aboriginal Woman* (Melbourne: Fraser & Morphet, 193-?); and Margaret Tucker, *If Everybody Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1977).

⁶ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. For more on Tucker's political work, see her autobiography, *If Everybody Cared* and Jennifer Jones, 'The Black Communist: The Contested Memory of Margaret Tucker', *Hecate* 26, no. 2 (2000): 135–43.

¹⁶ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 54.

²² Ibid., 65.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 54.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 66.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cited in Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 68.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

⁴² Richard Broome, 'At the Grass Roots of White Support: Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League Branches 1957–1972', in a special edition of the *La Trobe Journal*, *Indigenous Victorians: Repressed, Resourceful and Respected*, no. 85 (May 2010): 141. For more on Doug Nicholls, see Patricia Grimshaw's chapter in this volume on his wife, Gladys Nicholls. For more on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together to achieve outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal communities, see Sue Taffe, 'Fighting for Lake Tyers', *La Trobe Journal*, no. 85 (May 2010): 157–170.

⁴³ Broome, 'At the Grass Roots', 141.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* (Allen & Unwin, 1999), 173–4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 174. See also Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 344.

⁴⁸ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 75.

⁴⁹ Attwood and Markus, 277.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 43.

⁵² Dyer, *Room for One More*, 44. For more on the emergence of the term ‘stolen generations’, see Bain Attwood, ‘“Learning About the Truth”: The Stolen Generations Narrative’, in Attwood and Magowan (eds), 183–212; for more on the stolen generations, see Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800–2000* (Freemantle: Freemantle Art Centre Press, 2000); and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Commissioner Ronald Wilson), *Bringing Them Home: The Report of the National Inquiry into Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

⁵³ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 75.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 77.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁰ Ibid. For more on this experience of white mothers who fostered or adopted Aboriginal children, see Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). For more on Australian children in welfare, see Naomi Parry, ‘“Such a Longing”: Black and White Children in Welfare in New South Wales and Tasmania, 1880–1940’ (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2007).

⁷¹ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 94.

⁷² Ibid., 95.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁹ Mollie Dyer, *Report of an Aboriginal Overseas Study Grant Tour through Canada and United States, 20th June 1976 to 17th November 1976* (Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, 1976).

⁸⁰ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 121.

⁸¹ Ibid., 122.

⁸² Ibid., 123.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁵ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 364.

⁸⁶ See, for instance, Mollie Dyer, 'Working with Aboriginal Families and Children', *Australian Child and Family Welfare* 5, no. 3 (1980): 17–19; and Mollie Dyer, 'New Approaches to Programs for Children', *Social Security* (September, 1979): 70–2.

⁸⁷ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 133–4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 137.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 140.

⁹³ Ibid., 151.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ann Henderson, 'Minister Honours Mollie Dyer', media release distributed 1 July 1997.

⁹⁷ Leonarda Kovic and Barbara Lemon, 'Dyer, Mollie (1927–1998)', *Women in Australia website*, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE1246b.htm>.

⁹⁸ Dyer, *Room for One More*, 3. For a consideration of the issues associated with white people editing Aboriginal personal accounts, see Jennifer Jones, *Black Writers, White Editors: Episodes of Collaboration and Compromise in Australian Publishing History* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009).

⁹⁹ Gavin Jennings, 'The Inspirational Life of Koorie Activist Mollie Dyer', media release distributed 1 October 2003.