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**A 1960s Campaign to Save an Aboriginal Reserve: Lake Tyers in Victoria, Australia**

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A 1960s Campaign to  
Save an Aboriginal  
Reserve: Lake Tyers in  
Victoria, Australia.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In July 1971 a fourteen year long struggle to retain Lake Tyers aboriginal reserve was finally brought to an end. Ninety one shareholders consisting of previous and current Lake Tyers' residents were presented with the freehold title to the reserve by the Governor of Victoria in a well publicised and celebrated event attended by over seven hundred people and numerous camera crews.<sup>1</sup> This was a landmark occasion in that it was the first time in Australia's history that an unconditional freehold title was awarded to aborigines, making it the earliest success of the newly formed aboriginal land rights movement. Even at the time it seems activists and state officials were aware of the significance of the event. When the Governor of Victoria handed over the deeds of the reserve he publicly declared: "Mr Carter I express my sincere wish that history will record that today was a turning point in aboriginal affairs."<sup>2</sup>

This small 4000 acre reserve, which in 1965 had just over forty residents, was the only major return of land following the 1967 Referendum, begging the important question as to why the Lake Tyers campaign succeeded. Controversy over Lake Tyers attracted substantial public attention. Local and national aboriginal organisations along with individual activists and well known anthropologists from across the country united in a pioneering struggle over land rights. Yet, despite its significance, historians of aboriginal activism and politics have often failed to give the campaign the attention and examination it deserves, often only briefly mentioning it as part of the wider land rights movement. As this study will illustrate, the campaign to save Lake Tyers gives historians of the aboriginal rights movement and Australian political history a valuable insight into this formative period of the aboriginal land rights movement as well as the opportunity to examine one of the only success stories of the early 1970s. As Peter Pepper observes, 'from 1958, the history of Lake Tyers is deserving of a book in its own right.'<sup>3</sup>

Established as a mission by Reverend Bulmer in 1861, Lake Tyers was brought under state government control in 1908 and after 1957 came within the power and jurisdiction of the newly formed Victorian Welfare Board. Residents lived under

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<sup>1</sup> R. Broome & C. Manning, *A Man of All Tribes: The Life of Alick Jackomos* (Canberra, 2006), p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> T. Lee, 'Native Title Celebrates 30 years' (28/07/01)

<<http://www.abc.net.au/landline/stories/s333800.html>> accessed 15 January 2010.

<sup>3</sup> P. Pepper, *The Kurnai of Gippsland: What did Happen to the Aborigines of Victoria?* (Melbourne, 1985), p. 260.

the management and supervision of residential white staff employed by the Board and were subject to the changing policies of the state government towards aborigines which shifted from a policy of protection and segregation towards assimilation. In an effort to reduce expenditure on aborigines and to sell land to white settlers, aboriginal reserves were increasingly closed in Victoria in what many have identified as a second wave of dispossession.<sup>4</sup> By 1923, Lake Tyers was the only staffed reserve in the state and was home to two hundred and thirty aborigines.<sup>5</sup> Lake Tyers' survival had always been precarious as the land legally belonged to the government and could therefore be withdrawn at anytime. This was typical of aboriginal reserves as Australian aborigines were not seen as having any ownership of the land they occupied. The absence of settled villages, agriculture and political organisation meant aborigines did not officially exist in the eyes of British colonisers and so the country was deemed *terra nullius* in which no Crown treaties were enacted.<sup>6</sup>

Lake Tyers' closure seemed imminent after an enquiry led by Charles Mclean into the operation of the Aborigines Act recommended a policy of assimilation whereby the size of the reserve should be greatly reduced to cater exclusively for the old and infirm. In 1961 an assimilation policy was officially adopted by all state authorities across the country and in 1962, the Victorian Aborigines Welfare Board finally announced its decision to close Lake Tyers, which compelled all residents to move out into country towns across Victoria.<sup>7</sup> The subsequent struggle between the coalition of organisations working towards aboriginal rights and Lake Tyers' residents on the one hand, and the Welfare Board on the other, gained impetus and received public attention initially as an attack on the policy of assimilation but later became seen as part of the struggle for aboriginal land rights. By the early 1960s aboriginal leaders and activists were publicly voicing their opposition to assimilation as it was

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<sup>4</sup> G. Atkinson & M. Brett, 'An Historical Perspective on the Struggle for Land Justice in Victoria' (August, 2007).

<<http://www.nts.vic.gov.au/document/Land-Justice-in-Vic-23Aug07-NNTT.pdf>> accessed 15 January 2010.

<sup>5</sup>J. Chesterman & B. Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 124.

<sup>6</sup>A. Armitage, *Comparing the Policy of Assimilation: Australia, Canada and New Zealand* (Vancouver, 1998), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Many historians argue that unofficial assimilation policies occurred from the 1930s. Aboriginal Historian John Maynard has even argued that non-aboriginal historians have tried too hard to periodise and isolate assimilation whereas 'the perspective of aboriginal historians and aboriginal people in general is that assimilation was a weapon of destruction from the earliest periods of settlement.' See J. Clark, *Aboriginal Activism: Race, Aborigines and the Coming of the Sixties to Australia* (Crawley, Western Australia, 2008), p. 99.

increasingly seen as a ‘course of race destruction’.<sup>8</sup> Campaigners for Lake Tyers demanded that the reserve be kept open, that full land title be given to the aboriginal residents and that white management be removed and a co-operative set up in its place.

Regional and national organisations became involved in the campaign, marking the beginning of a national aboriginal identity and a national land rights movement. Before the early 1960s there had not been a strong state-wide or even inner-state aboriginal identity. Reserves tended to be inward looking communities, isolated from each other and the loyalty of most aborigines was to their own reserve.<sup>9</sup> This changed in the 1960s with the formation of a land rights movement which united aborigines for the first time on a national level. Demands for Lake Tyers to be made the legal property of aboriginal residents and for aboriginal self-management on the reserve were present in the early 1950s’.<sup>10</sup> However, it was not until the publication of the McLean Report in 1957 and the announcement of its closure in 1962 that demands to make Lake Tyers the legal property of its aborigines gained support from aboriginal organisations and a campaign to save it really took shape. It is therefore the period between 1957 and 1971 that will be the focus of this study.

The aboriginal land rights movement of the 1960s is only recently gaining attention from historians and still remains greatly underdeveloped as a subject of study. As such, comprehensive and analytical studies of Lake Tyers are extremely rare. The achievements of aboriginal rights has received little exposure in mainstream accounts of Australian history for many decades so that one could be forgiven for thinking it was insignificant in the nation’s history. According to Chesterman, aside from events such as the 1967 referendum, the gaining of aboriginal rights is ‘not part of the Australian public consciousness’. Even many extended scholarly accounts of aboriginal history rarely devote more than a few pages to the 1960s, often skipping to the radicalism of the 1970s when black power became widespread.<sup>11</sup> Early Australian studies on the 1960s have often denied or undervalued the input of aboriginal activism and issues of race in this period. This is evident in the debate between biographer

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<sup>8</sup>B. Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest, New South Wales, 2003), p. 205.

<sup>9</sup>R. Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-2001* (Sydney, 1982), p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Aborigines League, ‘Victorian State Program for Aborigines and Aborigines Castes. Campaign: ‘Objectives and Demands’, no date, Jackomos Papers in Broome, *Alick Jackomos*, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup>J. Chesterman, *Civil Rights: How Indigenous Australians Won Formal Equality* (St Lucia, Queensland, 2005), pp. 1-2.

A.W Martin and reviewer Jenny Hocking. Hocking criticised Martin's biography of Prime Minister Robert Menzies for the complete absence of aboriginal issues which she claimed had been of considerable interest to the federal government. Martin replied that aboriginal issues were a contemporary phenomenon and had not been on the political agenda at the time, a response which seemed to completely overlook the growing political activism and contribution of aborigines in this period.<sup>12</sup>

Only in recent years have historians started to pay attention to the ways aborigines resisted in the 1960s. The best examples of these are Bain Attwood's *Rights for Aborigines*, Jennifer Clark's *Coming of the Sixties* and Heather Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy*. Historians like Attwood and Clark have recognised the early 1960s as a formative period for the aboriginal land rights movement. Prior to the 1960s, demands of aboriginal activists had largely been devoted to civil rights such as gaining the federal vote and removing discriminatory legislation. But during the 1960s the movement became largely focused on the issue of returning dispossessed aboriginal land and/or claiming compensation for taken lands in what has been dubbed the 'land rights movement'.<sup>13</sup> However, these 1960s origins of the land rights movement have been disputed by Goodall in her research on aboriginal politics and demands in New South Wales. Goodall has effectively shown that the demands for aboriginal land tenure has been a constant thread running through the actions, statements and demands of aborigines in New South Wales from the earliest days of invasion.<sup>14</sup> In her PhD thesis, she illustrated that aborigines demanded both the rights of citizenship alongside the demand for land tenure based on the prior ownership of aborigines decades before the 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

For Goodall, the land rights and civil rights movement have long been intertwined. But Attwood and Clark have rejected her revisionist interpretation, arguing that it lacks historical specificity and exaggerates the similarities between earlier and later campaigns for land.<sup>16</sup> For although it is clear that demands for land have been present since colonisation, the nature and rhetoric of land demands did

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<sup>12</sup>Clark, *Aboriginal Activism*, p. 10 and J. Hocking, 'Review: A.W. Martin's Incomplete Menzies: No Aborigines, No Women', *Labour History*, 79 (Nov, 2000), pp. 216-217.

<sup>13</sup> The term 'aboriginal activism' being used throughout this essay refers to aboriginal and non-aboriginal campaigners fighting for aboriginal rights.

<sup>14</sup>H. Goodall., *Invasion to Embassy. Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Sydney, 1996), xix, p. 418.

<sup>15</sup> H. Goodall, *A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales, 1909-1939* (Sydney, 2007), vi.

<sup>16</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, pp. 215-6.



significantly change in the 1960s when the fight for land became a national movement in which land was seen as part of aborigines' indigenous rights, separate to citizens rights. Goodall's research was related to centres of local and scattered political action that were uncoordinated and unsustainable. But the 1960s saw a new direction which turned sporadic, local dissent into a discernible and national movement and the emergence of a powerful national discourse which regarded aborigines as a single entity entitled to land that had previously been theirs.<sup>17</sup> The idea of *terra nullius* which formed the basis of the land law in Australia was being increasingly challenged in the political and public domain.<sup>18</sup> The campaign to save Lake Tyers stands as a key moment in this embryonic phase of the land rights movement.

At present, Bain Attwood is the only historian to analyse the campaign in considerable detail but even this is limited in its scope. Attwood has traced the beginnings of the land rights movement to the campaign to save Yirrkala and Lake Tyers. Attwood argues that the campaign to save Lake Tyers was the first time activists applied the terminology of land rights to settled land and reserves. The early 1960s had seen the rise of this new terminology in which aborigines were seen as possessing traditional rights to tribal land. But this had only been applied to remote areas in Australia where aborigines were known to have occupied the land since before colonisation and where aboriginal culture was still fully intact. He claims it was not until Lake Tyers that aborigines across settled Australia began to declare their rights to land on the grounds of their indigeneity, thus marking the beginning of the national land rights movement.<sup>19</sup> Through his research, Attwood has effectively shown how the campaign evolved from a local issue into a national one, becoming fixed in the broad aboriginal consciousness. This will be further explored in this dissertation as it is one of the features that makes the Lake Tyers campaign unique and helps to explain why the campaign became a success and attracted such widespread attention.

Attwood has also explored the changing political discourse of the period and the roles played by aboriginal and non-aboriginal activists in the campaign. However, he tends to focus more on white leaders than aboriginal ones, a fact he admits himself

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<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Aboriginal Activism*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, pp. 248-9.

in the preface to his book.<sup>20</sup> This dissertation will elaborate on Attwood's observations and lines of enquiry, examining the cooperation of white and black activists in the campaign and the level of aboriginal agency. But will do so fairly, with equal focus on aboriginal and non-aboriginal participants.

Indeed, through an exploration of the Lake Tyers campaign one can gain a valuable insight into black/white relationships in the aboriginal rights movement in this period. The issue of aboriginal agency and white involvement in aboriginal organisations is hotly debated. Many historians from the 1980s onwards have tried to uncover aboriginal voice and agency from the past, working hard to counter the earlier histories which were written with a European perspective and which focused on government policy and white attitudes rather than aborigines themselves.<sup>21</sup> But in doing so, many have exaggerated the autonomy and power of aborigines in the Australian political domain thereby underestimating the work and commitment of non-aboriginal activists and white organisations.

Moreover, from the late 1960s onwards, aboriginal control over organisations became more prevalent with the development of aboriginal only member organisations and the 'aboriginalisation' of pre-existing multiracial organisations like the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League. As aboriginal self determination became more prevalent and the international discourse of black empowerment influenced aboriginal activists, so the involvement of whites in aboriginal affairs broke down. The early 1960s are now seen 'as an unusual period of co-operative activism between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.'<sup>22</sup> This study will use the Lake Tyers campaign to gain a rare and valuable insight into this brief period of inter-racial cooperation and growing aboriginal agency within the land rights movement.

The history of Lake Tyers and the struggle to retain it remains of great importance when we consider that Aboriginal land tenure remains what some consider, 'the most important and contentious' political issue in Australia today.<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>20</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, xii-xiii.

<sup>21</sup>B. Attwood & A. Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: a Documentary History* (Crows Nest, New South Wales, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup>S. Taffe, 'Witnesses from the Conference Floor: Oral History and the Federal Council for the Advancement for the Aborigines and Torres Straits Islanders', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 25: 67 (March,2001), p. 20.

<sup>23</sup>R. P. Hill, 'Blackfellas and Whitefellas: Aboriginal Land Rights, the Mabo Decision and the Meaning of Land', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 17:2 (1995), pp. 303-4.

overturning of the doctrine of *terra nullius* which assumed Australia was unoccupied at the time of British settlement only occurred with the 1993 Native Title Act which gave land title to clans or kinship groups which have maintained a traditional connection with land. But these recent developments have resulted in negative stereotyping by white Australians in an attempt to position them as unworthy of their rights and as the fear of ‘aborigines claiming your backyard as traditional lands’ spread across white Australia.<sup>24</sup> Increased knowledge of the dispossession of aboriginal land and the land rights movement is therefore of great importance in making the general public and authorities understand the feelings of modern day aborigines towards their land rights, perhaps helping to form a more sympathetic view towards them. Peter Read writes that whilst the early frontier massacres and violence have entered the historical understanding of non-aboriginal Australians, the actions of the state in the twentieth century have not. Greater attention needs to be placed on the ‘flagrant abuses of human rights - by state employees, not feral pastoralists - in our own century.’ These abuses relate principally to land dispossession and some have argued that reserve deprivation was even worse than massacres in the sense that it was sanctioned and executed by elected governments. Historians must therefore stand firm in their exploration of aboriginal history, ignoring the cries of some Australians who declare ‘we have heard enough’ for it is only when Australia fully understands and accepts the abuses of its past that the ‘basis on which reconciliation can proceed.’<sup>25</sup> As long as prejudice against aborigines and the fight for land rights continue, so the study of the history of the movement and dispossession must continue; a history which is incomplete without the study of Lake Tyers.

The lack of secondary material relating specifically to Lake Tyers means this study will rely mainly on primary sources. The problem of distance however limits the number of sources available for this study and I have had to depend primarily on digitised material although some have been sent by the National Library of Australia. The restrictive nature of this research field has resulted in the body of sources being somewhat fragmentary, consisting of a wide range of material such as oral histories, official documents, photographs, leaflets and campaign material from aboriginal organisations and newspaper articles. The latter is mostly from *The Age* newspaper

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<sup>24</sup> Hill, ‘Blackfellas and Whitefellas’, pp. 307-8.

<sup>25</sup> P, Read, ‘Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1970. By Heather Goodall: A Review.’  
 <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AboriginalLB/1996/84.html>> Accessed 13 January 2010.

which has been digitised for public use. It is a daily paper based in Melbourne and is therefore extremely useful for the Lake Tyers campaign which is located in the same state of Victoria. As the state capital of Victoria, Melbourne became a centre for the aboriginal rights movement, and so *The Age* developed as a forum of debate over aboriginal rights issues. There is an abundance of newspaper articles relating to Lake Tyers including editorials, feature articles and readers' letters. These have been written by Lake Tyers' campaigners, state officials who supported the closure of the reserve, well known anthropologists and members of the general public, thus offering a wide spectrum of opinions.

Unfortunately, the limited number of sources available means some lines of enquiry cannot be fully explored in this study. There is a lack of aboriginal produced material which is a common problem for all historians of aboriginal history. Due to aborigines' weak political presence, their oral tradition and the fact that many aborigines were illiterate and poorly educated, aboriginal produced material is often difficult to attain.<sup>26</sup> This study is short of material produced by Lake Tyers' residents themselves and there are only a few oral histories of residents during this period which this study will explore, but only in relation to the campaign. Because of the lack of sources this study will mainly examine the political struggle of the campaign, focusing on the work of aboriginal organisations and key aboriginal and non-aboriginal activists. It will attempt to assess the level of aboriginal agency and involvement in the campaign but this must often be done by looking at materials created by non-aboriginal campaigners. To only examine aboriginal produced material would be an impossible task. It would also be undesirable as it would result in an incomplete history as many key sources were produced or co-produced by non-aboriginal campaigners.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, historians are beginning to realise that through conventional documentary sources like official documents, aboriginal voices can be heard as well as European ones. As Reynolds has noted 'the barriers which for so long kept Aboriginal experience out of our history books were not principally those of source material...but rather those of perception and preference.'<sup>28</sup> Though the sources available are varied and fragmentary, an analytical examination of the campaign is achievable.

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<sup>26</sup> Attwood, *Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Attwood, *Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> B. Attwood., 'Reading Sources in Aboriginal History: Mission Station Visitor Books', *La Trobe Journal*, 43 (Autumn, 1989), p. 21.

This study will explore the underdeveloped history of the Lake Tyers campaign in order to ascertain how and why it received such substantial public attention and became the earliest success of the land rights movement. This dissertation will not give a comprehensive examination or narrative of the campaign.<sup>29</sup> Instead, it will take a thematic approach, elaborating on lines of enquiry in the existent historiography primarily through exploring the formation of a national aboriginal consciousness in the land rights movement and examining black/white relations. Chapter two will give an overview of events leading up to the campaign in order highlight the main issues involved in the campaign. Chapter three will examine the motives of activists and residents involved in the campaign and explore questions such as why aborigines resisted the closure of the reserve and why the campaign became so popular. The fourth chapter will explore the tactics of campaigners, focusing in particular on how blacks and whites interacted within the campaign. The fifth and final chapter will draw on the issues already covered in the dissertation in order to conclude with the biggest question of all: why the Lake Tyers campaign succeeded.

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<sup>29</sup> See Figure one in appendices for a timeline of the campaign.

## Chapter 2: Background of the Campaign.

Situated twenty miles from Lakes Entrance, the nearest large township, and six miles from any main road, Lake Tyers reserve has always been isolated from the outside world.<sup>30</sup> From its inception in 1861 to the handover of land title in 1971, the reserve remained state government land with white management living onsite. However, for decades leading up to the planned closure of Lake Tyers, the reserve had been largely neglected by the Victorian Protection Board. Living conditions had gradually become deplorable and most of the buildings had fallen into disrepair leaving the reserve ‘squalid, isolated and without hope.’<sup>31</sup> It was not until the 1957 Mclean Enquiry and Report that these conditions were addressed by the Protection Board and the solution to close Lake Tyers was first suggested.

The purpose of the government enquiry headed by Charles Mclean was to investigate and report on the operation and regulations of the 1928 Aborigines Act. Amongst the five lines of enquiry to be pursued in the investigation was ‘whether the aboriginal station at Lake Tyers i) should be retained and if so, the measures should be taken to maintain it on the most satisfactory basis ii) should it be discontinued, and if so, any system which should be instituted in its stead.’<sup>32</sup> After considering his findings, Mclean recommended a policy of active assimilation and the establishment of an Aborigines Welfare Board to enforce this. As part of this policy he recommended that Lake Tyers only be retained ‘in some form for aborigines who are aged, sick, infirm of otherwise necessitous’ and that its size be reduced from 4,000 to just 200 acres. All other residents would be forced off the reserve and ‘absorbed into the community.’<sup>33</sup> The language and findings of the report illustrate the deep seated racism of many white officials at the time and their support for assimilation. Though Mclean acknowledged the ‘unsatisfactory conditions’ of the reserve he seemed to have little sympathy for the aboriginal residents and blamed them for many of their misgivings, describing them as lazy, troublesome and wild. Meanwhile he stated that

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<sup>30</sup> M.T. Clark, *Pastor Doug* (Melbourne, 1966), p. 219. See figure two in appendices for a map of Lake Tyers.

<sup>31</sup> Save Lake Tyers Committee, Campaign Leaflet, 1965.

Council for Aboriginal Rights, MS 12913/3/8, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

<sup>32</sup> C. Mclean, *Report Under the Operation of the Aborigines Act 1928 and the Regulations and Orders Made Thereunder* (Melbourne, 1957), p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Mclean, *Report Under the Operation of the Aborigines Act*, pp. 14-15.

‘no blame could be attributed to the management’ and that in all it was a ‘benevolent institution.’<sup>34</sup>

The desire of Lake Tyers’ residents to retain and develop the reserve had been clearly set out in submissions made to Mclean during the enquiry by eight Lake Tyers’ aborigines and by the Australian Aborigines League, an organisation consisting of only aboriginal members.<sup>35</sup> But these proposals were dismissed by Mclean on the grounds that aborigines are ‘not agriculturists by inclination, nor would they co-operate and the property would become merely a harbour for all transient aborigines in the district.’<sup>36</sup> He did not propose the idea of training or education which could help the aborigines acquire these farming skills but suggested aborigines were undisciplined and would undoubtedly fail at such a venture.

In accordance with Mclean’s recommendations, the state government issued the 1957 Aborigines Act which abolished the Protection Board and created an Aborigines Welfare Board instructed to follow a policy of assimilation. Forced assimilation was not however pursued on Lake Tyers. Rather, residents were encouraged to move off the reserve with the promise of being re-housed elsewhere. This ‘voluntary’ rehousing policy remained the main tactic of the Board throughout the 1960s in its efforts to depopulate the reserve and was quite successful. In 1963, the reserve had 127 residents, but by the end of 1965 there was only 40 people remaining as many families chose the option of better housing.<sup>37</sup> Many Lake Tyers’ campaigners regarded this as a ‘policy of coercion’ whereby the Board deliberately refused to develop the reserve and used its bad conditions to ‘coerce Aboriginal residents to ‘choose’ to be re-housed elsewhere.’<sup>38</sup>

Further contention over Lake Tyers occurred in 1961 when Laurie Moffat, an aboriginal elder from Lake Tyers, approached the Council for Aboriginal Rights in Melbourne for help. He told them of the poor standard of living at Lake Tyers and asked for their support in fulfilling the wishes of residents which included creating a management committee consisting of elected representatives from the reserve, granting land tenure to the residents and forming a farming co-operative.<sup>39</sup> The

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<sup>34</sup> Mclean, *Report Under the Operation of the Aborigines Act*, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> D. Barwick, *Submission to the Minister: Future Policy for Lake Tyers* (Aboriginal Advancement League, Melbourne, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Mclean, *Report Under the Operation of the Aborigines Act*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>37</sup> M. Jackomos, ‘The History of Lake Tyers’, *Identity*, Oct 1971, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Save Lake Tyers Committee, Campaign Leaflet, 1965.

<sup>39</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, pp. 237-8.

Council for Aboriginal Rights was the first aboriginal organisation to take conditions at Lake Tyers seriously. Responding to Moffat's plea for help, they sent a delegation of Council members to the reserve to investigate. Unlike the brief description of 'unsatisfactory conditions' in the Mclean Report, the Council gave a detailed report of conditions on the reserve. When they visited in December 1961 they reported substandard and over-crowded housing whereby there was only thirty 'huts' for around 150 people.<sup>40</sup> They reported that the homes were extremely unhygienic and had no running water, bathrooms or garbage disposal. Community bath houses existed but were hundreds of yards away from some of the houses. Medical treatment was also substandard with the nearest doctor being 55 miles away and only visiting the reserve once a month.<sup>41</sup> The report also highlighted and criticised the restrictions of residents and the control of the management. Whereas the Mclean Report portrayed the reserve as a place where residents 'come and go as they please' and where there 'is a complete lack of authority over them', the Council listed a range of restrictive regulations which sought to contain and control the residents.<sup>42</sup> For example, residents could not have visitors without the manager's permission and similarly, could not leave the reserve without permission. To enforce this further, residents were not permitted to own vehicles making transport to Lakes Entrance very difficult and anyone disobeying these rules of the reserve could be made to pay a \$2 fine.<sup>43</sup>

Ironically, despite the Council's recommendation that the land be handed to the aborigines and a co-operative put in place, the negative findings of the Council encouraged the Welfare Board to close the reserve as it was increasingly seen as inhumane and uninhabitable. Only a few months after the publication of the Council's findings, the closure of Lake Tyers was announced in February 1962 by the Welfare board who described such reserves as 'a relic of past governments'.<sup>44</sup> Reserves like Lake Tyers which had previously been designed to protect the aborigines and segregate them from the white community no longer fitted with the government's new aim of assimilation whereby aborigines would be absorbed into the white community

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<sup>40</sup> See figure three in appendices for a photograph of the houses on Lake Tyers.

<sup>41</sup> Council for Aboriginal Rights (Victoria), *Statement on the Lake Tyers Government Settlement* (Melbourne, 1962), p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Mclean, *Report Under the Operation of the Aborigines Act*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Council for Aboriginal Rights, *Statement on Lake Tyers*, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 240.



and made to 'live like white Australians do.'<sup>45</sup> Thus, began a campaign to save Lake Tyers aboriginal reserve.

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<sup>45</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 175.

### Chapter 3: Motivations and Public Support.

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From 1963 onwards the campaign to save Lake Tyers received substantial public attention and support. Numerous organisations that dedicated themselves to obtaining aboriginal rights joined the campaign at this time, such as the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League and the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement. Support also came from the Australian Communist Party, the Australian Women's Union and numerous Church organisations as well as from notable figures not affiliated with an organisation, such as the famous anthropologist Diane Barwick. However, considering the appalling conditions of the reserve already highlighted in the previous chapter and the promise of better housing elsewhere in the state by the Welfare Board, one must question why so many people resisted the closure of the reserve. On the surface, the promise of better housing seems a positive step by the Welfare Board but by examining the feelings and motives of Lake Tyers' residents it is possible to understand why so many people chose to resist its closure.

(ii)

For Lake Tyers' residents the reasons for them wanting to retain the reserve were strongly rooted in local and personal factors. Despite the decrepit housing and dictatorial management, the reserve had been home to them and their families for generations.<sup>46</sup> There was a strong sense of community and kinship ties amongst those who lived on the reserve as well as attachments to those that had died and were buried onsite. Lake Tyers' resident and spokesperson Charlie Carter once said that he would not 'like to see Lake Tyers closed because we got our dear ones just over yonder resting in peace.'<sup>47</sup> The Welfare Board failed to understand this strong sense of attachment and simply responded with the guarantee that 'we'll preserve the cemetery, of course.'<sup>48</sup> In a recent oral interview the former Lake Tyers' resident 'Aunt Ivy', reflects fondly of her life on the reserve. Several members of her family moved there in the 1940s and since then a sense of community spirit grew from

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<sup>46</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 238.

<sup>47</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 238.

<sup>48</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 218.

attending the same primary school on the reserve, living closely with other residents and attending regular dances.<sup>49</sup> Despite the fact that Lake Tyers was full of aborigines from all over the state, she describes the reserve in the 1950s and 1960s as a ‘close knit family’. Whilst she acknowledges that the managers ‘were strict, very strict’ and that life could be difficult due to a lack of facilities and resources, she claims that it was ‘really good growing up here’ and states ‘I wouldn’t give my left or right hand to go away from here because its really and truly home here and you can live in harmony here...’<sup>50</sup>

Even before the closure of Lake Tyers was announced, residents were expressing Lake Tyers as their home and wanted to keep it permanently. Moffat regularly stated ‘we love the land here and don’t want to lose it’ and as far back as 1952 started writing to newspapers asking that Lake Tyers be handed over to the residents and that the white management be abolished.<sup>51</sup> Campaigners originally acknowledged the aborigines’ personal attachment to Lake Tyers. In her ‘Future Policy of Lake Tyers Station’ anthropologist Diane Barwick wrote that amongst the majority of Victorian aborigines, ‘communities of kin and life-long friends are a vital source of security and reassurance’ and that at Lake Tyers in particular, there is ‘strong sentimental attachment to the land’ which should be preserved by the state government.<sup>52</sup>

Lake Tyers was also a place of refuge and security for residents in a state where numerous reserves had already been closed down and where there was a history of poverty and racism on the fringes of country towns where many aborigines lived.<sup>53</sup> Over the course of Barwick’s anthropological research between October 1960 and April 1961 in Victoria she found that a collective memory of dispossessed aboriginal land existed amongst Victorian aborigines. She wrote that ‘because so many can remember, and the younger people have been told of the removal of aboriginal communities from reserves which had been their homes...the remaining reserve communities are on the whole suspicious of efforts to move them into nearby

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<sup>49</sup> See figure four in appendices for a photograph of the primary school on Lake Tyers.

<sup>50</sup> (Aunty) Ivy Marks (Interviewed by G. Grieves), 2003 (Precise date not known).

<[http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake\\_tyers/voices\\_of\\_lake\\_tyers/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake_tyers/voices_of_lake_tyers/default.htm)> accessed 29 January 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Clark, *Pator Doug*, p. 223.

<sup>52</sup> Barwick, *Submission to the Minister*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 238.

towns.<sup>54</sup> By 1923, Lake Tyers was the only remaining staffed government reserve in the state with the majority of aborigines living in shanty towns. With the memory of the closed reserves firmly fixed in the residents' consciousness and with the knowledge of the poverty of most Victorian aborigines, many residents were motivated by a mixture of fear and defiance in preventing the closure of Lake Tyers. We can see this collective memory in several sources, for example in 1952, *The Age* published a statement by Laurie Moffat that read:

‘we do not want to see Lake Tyers finally sold to the white man in the same way as Ramahyuck, Condah, Ebenezer mission and Corranderrk reserves have been sold. All these have been hostels for the aborigines in my lifetime and have been sold to the white man to cultivate.’<sup>55</sup>

Though the option of better housing seemed favourable to the Welfare Board, in reality it was not as desirable to the aborigines as they had hoped. The Board stated that housing would be in nearby towns but this was often not the case and numerous families were sent away as far as Stawell, Horsham and Ararat which were over 500km away.<sup>56</sup> More importantly, the Board underestimated the paternalistic environment of Lake Tyers reserve and overestimated their ability to be absorbed into the white community. Since 1861, residents had worked under the instruction of non-aboriginal workers and white management. All able bodied adults on the reserve were expected to work onsite and were given rations in return. Without wages, residents had never learnt how to buy their own supplies.<sup>57</sup> Residents had never had to provide for themselves and many lacked the necessary skills to live in the outside world. Mothers had no idea how to provide for their children as their child endowment money was paid directly to the manager and residents had had no experience in budgeting due to the hand-out system.<sup>58</sup> This meant that even though some residents may have been attracted to the idea of better housing, the fear of leaving the paternalistic environment convinced many to stay on Lake Tyers or in some cases, urged them to return after leaving.

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<sup>54</sup> Barwick, *Submission to the Minister*, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Barwick, *Submission to the Minister*, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Council for Aboriginal Rights, *The Struggle for Dignity: A critical Analysis of the Australian Aborigine Today, the Laws which Govern Him and their Effects* (Melbourne, 1962), p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Council for Aboriginal Rights, *Struggle for Dignity*, p. 13.

Indeed, out of the thirteen Lake Tyers' families that had 'chosen' to be rehoused by 1965, eight had made applications to return to Lake Tyers after finding it too difficult to cope in the white community. Almost all were refused re-entry by the Welfare Board which resulted in many of them moving back onto the reserve illegally or setting up tents on the fringes of the reserve. As a leaflet for the Lake Tyers campaign stated, 'past policies of the Board have failed to equip them to handle their own housing, budgeting, employment, social solutions etc. Against their desires they have been coerced into launching out into white society with dire consequences for each family.'<sup>59</sup>

Not only could they not cope with the daily duties of everyday life, but Lake Tyers' aborigines also faced a life of discrimination in the outside world.<sup>60</sup> Aunty Eileen's family were persuaded to leave Lake Tyers in 1963 and were given a 'huge house' with three rooms, a bathroom and a toilet. But despite the benefits of such accommodation-which was far superior to that in Lake Tyers- Eileen describes an unhappy life due to racism and isolation. In a recent oral interview she recalled being named 'abbo and nigger' on the street and at school. This treatment she says led her to drop out of school at fourteen years old. Moreover she reflects that her mother became terribly homesick and resented getting 'really disgusting looks' from people everywhere she went. Longing to be back in Lake Tyers and consistently shunted from the white community, both her parents turned to alcohol.<sup>61</sup> This was not an isolated case of discrimination as it seems the Welfare Board's decision to move Lake Tyers' aborigines into white towns was met with much hostility. An article in *The Age* entitled 'Township Bitter about Plan to Move Aborigines Near Homes of Whites' reported that 'angry white residents' in the town of Nowa Nowa were threatening to sell their homes and move out if the Board followed through with its plans to rehouse three aboriginal families from Lake Tyers in the town. The article reported negatively on the Board's rehousing scheme and all the comments of white townspeople are derogatory towards the aborigines describing them as 'terrible', not decent and 'trouble'. One townspeople even declared the move is 'the worst thing that has ever

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<sup>59</sup> Save Lake Tyers Committee, Campaign Leaflet, 1965, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Barwick, Submission to the Minister, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> (Aunty) Eileen Harrison (Interviewed by G. Grieves), 2003 (Precise date not known).

<[http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake\\_tyers/voices\\_of\\_lake\\_tyers/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/lake_tyers/voices_of_lake_tyers/default.htm)> accessed 29 January 2010.

happened' in the town and another feared that the town would become another Lake Tyers, overtaken by aborigines.<sup>62</sup>

Even if some of the Lake Tyers' residents wished to move off the reserve it seems the local white community was not prepared to have them in their towns. Faced with this hostility it is unsurprising that many Lake Tyers' residents preferred to stay on the safety of the reserve and fought to retain their home and refuge. It seems better housing was a poor consolation for living on the fringes of white society, shunted by the local community and thrust, unprepared, into a new life of independency which most could not grasp.

(iii)

After establishing why residents themselves resisted the closure of the reserve we must examine why the campaign to save Lake Tyers attracted such mass support and publicity. From 1963 Lake Tyers regularly featured in Victorian newspapers and received support from a wide range of organisations. I believe the most conducive factor in explaining this popularity and mass support is the nationwide shift in public opinion over aboriginal affairs and assimilation that Steve Mickler has touched upon in his recent study of two daily Perth newspapers between 1960 and 1972.

Following his examination of these papers, Mickler found that in 1960 reports concerning aboriginal affairs were relatively short and infrequent reflecting a marginal interest in aboriginal affairs amongst the papers' readerships. Any articles regarding aborigines tended to quote non-aboriginal sources and authorities with aborigines themselves rarely being quoted or interviewed. With aboriginal perspective infrequently acknowledged, state policies regarding aborigines were seldom criticised in the press. Mickler detects change however in the early 1960s with public interest in aboriginal affairs increasing and public uniformity over the policy of assimilation beginning 'rapidly to fragment'. By 1965, these Perth papers were incorporating aboriginal perspectives at least once a week and movements and campaigns over land rights were receiving widespread exposure. Alongside stories of aboriginal political agency were stories endorsing assimilation, illustrating a huge divide in public opinion over the policy. Overall, Mickler concluded that over the course of the 1960s the state 'lost its monopoly on the production of meaning about aboriginal affairs' and

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<sup>62</sup> 'Township Bitter about Plan to Move Aborigines Near Homes of Whites', *The Age*, 15 March 1960.

that a body of public opinion emerged that was increasingly ‘sceptical, incredulous and hostile to state aboriginal policy.’<sup>63</sup>

I believe this methodology and thesis can also be applied to the case of Lake Tyers. An examination of articles and letters to the editor from *The Age* between 1950 and 1970 reveals a similar pattern to Mickler’s findings. Until the publication of the Mclean Report in 1957 there are virtually no articles on Lake Tyers or aborigines elsewhere in the state. There is a notable increase in articles relating to Lake Tyers between 1957 and 1960 but these are devoid of aboriginal perspective and uncritically report the government’s aim of assimilation with very little rebuttal from the public in the letters to the editor page. From 1963 onwards however, there is a drastic increase in the number of articles reporting on Lake Tyers and in the number of readers’ letters overtly criticising the Welfare Board and supporting the retention of Lake Tyers. On 11<sup>th</sup> May 1963 an article by reporter Stuart Sayers supporting the closure of Lake Tyers with the argument that the reserve was costing the taxpayer around \$27,774 a year to run was met with mostly letters disagreeing with the author.<sup>64</sup> One such letter from a non-aboriginal Victorian dismissed the cost as a significant factor and instead argued that ‘the all important fact’ is that the majority of the people at Lake Tyers have ‘stated that they do not wish to leave the settlement on which they were born and which they regard as home.’<sup>65</sup> Many Victorian citizens not associated with an organisation were publicly sympathising with the local demands of Lake Tyers’ residents. Not only was Lake Tyers gaining more press coverage than ever but it was also being debated unlike any other aboriginal issue in Victoria. Thus, reinforcing Mickler’s conclusion that belief in assimilation was beginning to ‘rapidly fragment’ amongst the white community. Indeed, in May 1963, Lake Tyers’ closure was debated on the letters to the editor page for an unprecedented three weeks, reflecting the high amount of public interest and debate.<sup>66</sup>

Whilst the number of letters to the editor criticising the policy over Lake Tyers rapidly increased from 1963 onwards, the amount of *articles* criticising assimilation and the Board grew at a slower pace. Nevertheless, criticism did still increase and by 1966, *The Age* was publishing more articles that criticised the Welfare Board than

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<sup>63</sup> S. Mickler, ‘The Perth Press and Problematising Aboriginal Status’.  
<<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/imp/articles.html>> accessed 13 January 2010.

<sup>64</sup> S. Sayers, ‘Human Failure of Lake Tyers Experiment’, *The Age*, 11 May 1963.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Lake Tyers Settlement’, Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 15 May 1963.

<sup>66</sup> S. Taffe, *Black and White Together: FCAATSI. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders 1958-1973* (St Lucia, Queensland, 2005), p. 185.

articles that supported it bringing much embarrassment to the state government and highlighting the increasing unpopularity of the Board. One such article stated that the main reason for Lake Tyers deplorable state was the ‘growth in the idea of assimilation’ adopted by the Board. Indeed, it asserted that to many people assimilation had become a ‘dirty word’.<sup>67</sup>

Though this analysis is not statistically grounded or comprehensive in scope, it is an indicative sample of routine reporting over this period which enables us to draw some broad conclusions on the change in public opinion and the representation of aborigines in the media. It would be wrong to assume that the white public had become entirely supportive of the Lake Tyers’ aborigines. As mentioned earlier, there were newspaper reports displaying white hostility and alongside letters to the editor supporting the retention of the reserve, there were also articles supporting the Welfare Board. However, from these findings it is possible to detect a definite shift amongst the white public. The increasing amount of press coverage on Lake Tyers from 1963 reflects a broader interest in aboriginal affairs amongst the white population whilst the increasing amount of letters and articles sympathising with the aborigines’ demands and attacking the Welfare board suggests a growing scepticism of the policy of assimilation.

Fortunately for the Lake Tyers’ residents, the announcement of the reserve’s closure was made in a period when the assimilationist view that ‘the successful aborigine was the Europeanised aborigine’ was being seriously debated across Australia and when the aboriginal rights movement was capturing the attention of the white public.<sup>68</sup> The growth of aboriginal political activism in the late 1950s and 1960s, was receiving widespread media coverage and spreading aboriginal narratives of the past, present and future across the country, bringing vital knowledge of unknown perspectives to the public debate which challenged the existing mindset that advocated the policy of assimilation.<sup>69</sup> Black activists like Doug Nicholls and Joe McGinness, were frequently voicing their opposition to assimilation. In 1958, Nicholls told a white audience that aborigines wanted integration not assimilation, claiming it was seen by the aboriginal community as a racist policy.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>67</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 26 Nov 1966.

<sup>68</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 175.

<sup>69</sup> A. Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970* (North Fremantle, Western Australia, 2008), p. 342.

<sup>70</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 241, p. 243.



global events such as the Sharpeville massacre were regularly featured in Australian newspapers and the growing international criticism of South Africa's apartheid forced many white Australians to reflect on their own country's treatment of aborigines.<sup>71</sup> For example, in a letter to *The Age* in May 1963 one Victorian woman defended the retention of Lake Tyers by writing 'we are quick to condemn the apartheid policy in South Africa or the racial discrimination in U.S.A, but what right have we to criticise when almost similar conditions exist in our own country?...they (aborigines) should be treated as human beings with equal human rights.'<sup>72</sup>

Across the country, white campaigners for aboriginal rights who had once agreed with assimilation, seeing it as a means to gain equal citizen rights, increasingly regarded it as a racist and destructive practice. In the late 1950s, Shirley Andrews of the Council for Aboriginal Rights regarded it as 'the worst sort of racism'. Condemnation of the policy also occurred in the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement who rejected assimilation in favour of integration, and amongst the Australian Communist Party.<sup>73</sup> Even normally politically conservative protestant churches which had earlier backed the government's policies became sceptical about assimilation with local churches choosing to support the Lake Tyers campaign.<sup>74</sup> Thus, when the announcement of Lake Tyers' closure was made aboriginal residents found a receptive audience to their demands both in organisations that had earlier condemned assimilation and vowed to work against it, and amongst members of the white public who were becoming increasingly aware of aboriginal affairs and critical of assimilation.

As a corollary, the campaign to save Lake Tyers was initially shaped around a critique of assimilation with the argument that it would destroy aboriginal identity, culture and community at Lake Tyers. When the Council for Aboriginal Rights first took control of the campaign in 1961 they presented it around an attack on assimilation alongside acknowledging the personal attachment of residents to the land. The Council condemned the idea that aborigines 'be merged into the general community and live in the same way as white Australians' demanding that 'instead of dispersal amongst the white community, this small group of people should keep their

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<sup>71</sup> Clark, *Aboriginal Activism*, p. 24.

<sup>72</sup> 'Treatment of the Aborigines', Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 8 May 1963.

<sup>73</sup> Taffe, *Black and White Together*, p. 55.

<sup>74</sup> Taffe, *Black and White Together*, p. 55.

identity and develop economically as a...community.’<sup>75</sup> Time and again the fact that Lake Tyers was the ‘last reserve in the state’ and ‘home and refuge’ to Lake Tyers’ aborigines was emphasised in campaign material alongside a simultaneous attack on assimilation.<sup>76</sup> For example, in a letter to *The Age* Lorna Lippman of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League wrote ‘to many of Victoria’s aboriginal folk Lake Tyers is their home where they have their roots and a feeling of belonging to a community. Such a feeling they do not usually have when they are dotted around the white community...this policy of assimilation requires them to lose their identity as a people.’<sup>77</sup> As this dissertation will shortly explore, the Lake Tyers campaign later became dominated by the issue of land tenure and set within the context and rhetoric of the land rights movement. However, for the first few years, campaigners recognised the local and personal connections of the Lake Tyers’ aborigines to their land, forming the campaign around the ethical argument that the reserve was a home, refuge and the last piece of aboriginal land left to its aborigines, whilst simultaneously shaping the campaign around an attack on the nation-wide policy of assimilation which had become a popular and contentious issue.

Indeed, it was initially argued that ‘the retaining of Lake Tyers....must be seen as a practical humane plan which can offer security, shelter and stability to family life.’<sup>78</sup> When Doug Nicholls resigned from the Welfare Board in May 1963 over the policy of Lake Tyers he did not describe the retention of the reserve in terms of land rights but purely as an attack on assimilation. In a statement explaining his resignation he said: ‘the settlement should be retained and developed along co-operative lines. Assimilation in a forced manner will destroy my people’s social structure and kill them as people.’<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Council for Aboriginal Rights, *Struggle for Dignity*, p. 77.

<sup>76</sup> Victorian State Executive of the Communist Party, ‘Lake Tyers and the Aborigines of Gippsland’, 2 May 1963.

<http://indigenoustrights.net.au/document.asp?iID=844> >accessed 12 January 2010.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Farming for Aborigines’, Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 17 May 1963.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Why Retain Lake Tyers?’, Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 27 May 1963.

<sup>79</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 243.

Chapter 4: Tactics and Black/White Relations.

(i)

As mentioned previously, the 1960s was a period of rapid growth in aboriginal political activism across Australia with the issue of aboriginal rights being brought to the public domain by aborigines and non-aboriginal Australians alike. There is much debate however, over the issue of black/white relations in this growing stage of political activism. Accusations that white involvement and influence had been limited in the aboriginal rights movements emerged from the late 1960s. The black power movement in Australia facilitated the myth that white support in the past had been largely damaging to the aborigines whereby support had ‘been degrading’ and conducted in a ‘paternalistic’ manner in order to prevent aborigines from gaining control of their own affairs.<sup>80</sup> More recently, historians like Anderson and Foley have argued that the contribution of non-aboriginal campaigners has often been exaggerated in the historiography of this period. Indeed, they claim that ‘all the major advances of the long land rights movement and civil rights movement have been driven by aboriginal voices, and aboriginal controlled organisations’ whilst the ‘role of whites...has often obscured the developments of the indigenous movement.’<sup>81</sup>

Anderson and Foley’s conclusions are true to some extent. In the case of Lake Tyers, it is possible to trace aboriginal demands for land tenure back to 1947 when the Australian Aborigines League called for ‘immediate steps to make the station together with the Land Titles.....the property of the aborigines.’<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, in 1956, Laurie Moffat travelled to Melbourne and presented the editor of *The Sun* with a letter from the people of Lake Tyers requesting they be allowed to remain there permanently and run their own farm.<sup>83</sup> In this sense, demands for land tenure were originally ‘driven by aboriginal voices.’<sup>84</sup> However, in the case of Lake Tyers, white campaigners and multiracial organisations played a vital role in the success and development of the campaign. Furthermore, despite the claims of the black power movement, white members and multiracial organisations actually fostered aboriginal identity, community, involvement and self-determination.

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<sup>80</sup>B. McGinness, ‘Don’t Go it Alone’, *Smoke Signals*, 8: 3 (March, 1970), pp. 3-4.

<sup>81</sup>T. Anderson & G. Foley, ‘Land Rights and Aboriginal Voices’, *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 12:1 (2006), p. 99.

<sup>82</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 239.

<sup>83</sup> Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, *Victims or victors? : The Story of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League* (Melbourne, 1985), p. 70.

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, ‘Land Rights and Aboriginal Voices’, p. 99.

(ii)

Before Lake Tyers, the Council for Aboriginal Rights had never concerned itself with a local matter and had had no close relations with aboriginal people.<sup>85</sup> During much of the 1950s, white campaigners for aboriginal rights had not worked alongside aborigines, preferring instead to speak on behalf of aborigines without consulting them. However, as part of this new 1960s phase of black and white cooperation, the Council worked hard to involve Lake Tyers' residents in the campaign and chose to work alongside them for the first time. Instead of hindering aboriginal autonomy, the Council worked towards achieving it, asserting that state authorities should respect and communicate with 'the leaders within the groups of the Aboriginal people themselves, for no one understands the Aboriginal more than the aboriginal himself.'<sup>86</sup> In keeping with this, it encouraged a 'two way flow of advice and information' between itself and residents on the reserve. Council members regularly visited Lake Tyers and fully supported a policy of self determination after listening to aborigines themselves make such demands. To emphasise this new phase of cooperation and to highlight the demands as coming from the residents themselves, the Council issued statements like these:

'(co-operative are) the type of development the Lake Tyers people desire, they have given the Council for Aboriginal Rights a very clear indication in this regard, in the form of a petition signed by the vast majority of the aborigines residing on the station.'<sup>87</sup>

It is undeniable that most of the organisations involved in the Lake Tyers campaign were initially dominated by whites. Even the multiracial Victorian Aborigines Advancement League admitted in its official history that its leadership had originally been lacking in aboriginal members.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, the Council for Aboriginal Rights was primarily a middle class white organisation when it was first established in 1951. However, their aim was always to stimulate interest and involvement among

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<sup>85</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 242.

<sup>86</sup> Council for Aboriginal Rights, Report by Kath Walker on her National Tour launching the petition of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement and her speech in Sydney on 6 Oct 1962 in Attwood, *Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, p. 190.

<sup>87</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 241.

<sup>88</sup> Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, *Victims and Victors*, p. 53.

aborigines in their own political struggle. Over the course of the 1960s, the organisations involved rapidly recruited more aboriginal members and worked towards creating a nation-wide aboriginal community beyond the inward looking communities of reserves and local kinship groups. Indeed, when the Federal Council joined the Lake Tyers campaign in 1963 it was natural for the organisation to include Lake Tyers in their nation-wide agenda. With its fifth basic principle being ‘the absolute retention of all remaining native reserves, with native communal or individual ownership’ it was simultaneously coordinating numerous campaigns for land across Australia and sought to make Lake Tyers’ residents feel like part of this national struggle. For example, in a ‘Save Lake Tyers’ meeting attended by the aboriginal residents, president of the Federal Council, Joe McGinness, stressed the importance of Lake Tyers whilst also emphasizing its links with other reserves across the country. He stated that ‘the Federal Council has been most concerned over the filching of Reserves in other states and we would not like the same thing to happen to Lake Tyers...’ Using a map to illustrate his point, he then listed the threatened reserves Yirrkala, Weipa, Mapoon, MonaMona and Lake Tyers which were located throughout Australia.<sup>89</sup>

The Federal Council’s annual meetings also played a crucial role in this pursuit. Before the establishment of the Federal Council in 1958, each state had one or more groups working on behalf of aboriginal rights but they had very little contact with each other. By creating a national body via the Federal Council, it was hoped that these organisations would be welded together, creating a single force which could speak nationally on their behalf.<sup>90</sup> Every year, aborigines across the country were invited to attend the meetings and share stories of land dispossession and violation of rights. These conferences were essential to the cultivation of a sense of community among aborigines themselves and white organisers went to great efforts to ensure aboriginal delegates could attend them by arranging transport and sometimes subsidising costs. In a 1996 interview, the secretary of the Council for Aboriginal Rights, Pauline Pickford, expressed this intention for the Lake Tyers’ residents. She said, ‘...it became imperative as the Federal Council developed, for as many people in Lake Tyers as possible to get to Canberra, and so ...seven to ten aboriginal people

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<sup>89</sup> J. McGinness, Address to ‘Save Lake Tyers’ Meeting’, Melbourne, May 22 1963 in Attwood, *Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, p. 198.

<sup>90</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, pp. 187-8.

from the reserve were taken...’ As well as donating funds for the cost of the trip, a member of the Council drove the aborigines himself to Canberra which was 400km away from the reserve.<sup>91</sup>

Whilst there, Lake Tyers’ residents had the opportunity to voice their own experiences of dispossession as well as listening to others across the country, enabling them to expand their knowledge of land dispossession beyond Victoria. After discussions, socials were held which were equally important in stimulating community sentiment and pan-aboriginal feeling. Alick Jackomos who helped plan the socials commented that ‘everybody would go up and was united there.’ Everyone would form a circle and sing ‘we shall overcome’ and at the end of the conference ‘everybody would kiss everybody goodbye, and yell ‘see you next year’.<sup>92</sup> Through these conferences, new relationships and channels of communication were forged among political campaigners and aboriginal landholders encouraging what had previously been a collection of local land claims to be subsumed into a continent-wide land rights agenda.<sup>93</sup>

Though white campaigners did have influential roles within the Lake Tyers campaign, the most important figure was undoubtedly aboriginal pastor and campaigner, Doug Nicholls who was a member of a number of aboriginal organisations including the Federal Council and the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League. Nicholls was crucial in gaining the support of whites whilst also fostering a strong sense of aboriginal identity and pride amongst his own people.<sup>94</sup> As a former player for the Northcote Victorian football team, Nicholls had state-wide fame and popularity which as he became more involved in aboriginal rights, helped attract many whites to his cause. His personal involvement in the Lake Tyers campaign boosted white public support and publicity for the campaign with his activities alone being the factor for the recruitment of 30% of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League’s members in 1965.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, his ability to converse with the white community was of particular importance in a period when there was a ‘lack of confidence and experience on the part of many

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<sup>91</sup> Pauline Pickford (Interviewed by L. Miller and S. Taffe), 15 November 1996, at <http://indigenoustrights.net.au/person.asp?pID=1017> accessed 28 January 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Broome, *A Man of All Tribes*, p. 130.

<sup>93</sup> McGregor, ‘Another Nation’, p. 354.

<sup>94</sup> Taffe, *Black and White Together*, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Victorian Advancement League, *Victims or Victors?*, pp. 71-2.

aborigines....when it came to public speaking, writing letters to the papers and personal discussions with politicians.’<sup>96</sup>

Nicholls became a trusted and influential advocate for aboriginal people whilst also bridging the gap between black and whites. He also had numerous relationships with important white officials such as the Prime Minister Robert Menzies and members of the Welfare Board of which he used to be a member.<sup>97</sup> However, when Nicholls resigned from the Welfare Board in 1963 in protest of their decision to close Lake Tyers, he made his commitment to the aboriginal residents clear. After witnessing the closure of his own reserve of Cumeroogunja in New South Wales, Nicholls could personally sympathise with the Lake Tyers’ residents. In 1963 he vowed to make sure Lake Tyers would not be closed like Cumeroogunja, declaring ‘I will fight to the end to prevent it happening to the Lake Tyers’ families.’<sup>98</sup> Though empathising with the local connections of residents to Lake Tyers, Nicholls also sought to bring them into a broader understanding of their aboriginality encouraging them to see their struggle as one for aborigines everywhere. He made such public comments as ‘our birthplace means much to our people’ thus drawing Lake Tyers’ residents into the aboriginal collective and repeatedly stated that ‘we must retain group identity. It is our only strength.’<sup>99</sup>

Success in fostering this broader aboriginal identity is best shown in the protest march in Melbourne on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1963 led by Nicholls, Joe McGinness and aboriginal elder, Laurie Moffat. Forty residents from Lake Tyers marched through the streets and presented a petition of 260 aboriginal signatures demanding land title for Lake Tyers’ residents, an end to reserve management and adequate finance to develop it. Despite being organised by largely white organisations, it was presented as an aboriginal march led by aboriginal men, followed by aboriginal residents, presenting a petition filled with aboriginal signatures. Even the signs they carried emphasized this was an aboriginal issue with them reading ‘Lake Tyers for the Aborigines’ and with aboriginal drawings featured on the main banner.<sup>100</sup> The isolation and restrictions of Lake Tyers reserve meant that the organisations involved had to coordinate and fund the movement of forty residents 200 miles across the country. Furthermore,

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<sup>96</sup> Taffe, *Black and White Together*, p. 21.

<sup>97</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 229.

<sup>98</sup> Letter to the editor, *The Age*, 27 May 1963.

<sup>99</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 227.

<sup>100</sup> See figure five in appendices for a photograph of the Lake Tyers protest march. In Melbourne.

permission had to be granted from the secretary of the Welfare Board for every aborigine who attended the march as Lake Tyers' residents had to have permission when leaving or entering the reserve.<sup>101</sup> Thus, reflecting the huge efforts of campaigners to cultivate a sense of aboriginal identity and involvement among Lake Tyers' residents. Indeed, the Lake Tyers campaign was an example of black and white cooperation, not white domination.

(iii)

As stated in the previous chapter, the fight for Lake Tyers was originally constructed around an attack of assimilation. However, in the wake of Yirrkala, 1963, the issue of land rights based on aboriginal indigeneity increasingly began to shape the Lake Tyers campaign. Most historians generally agree that the national land rights movement began with Yirrkala in 1963 whereby aboriginal residents of this reserve in the Northern Territory fought against plans to mine their land. The fact that the aborigines had lived on the land since before colonisation and were thought by anthropologists to have remained in possession of their traditional culture was of crucial importance to the campaign. Petitioners of Yirrkala stressed that the land was a sacred place for the aborigines and described the land as 'hunting and food gathering land for the Yirrkala tribes from time immemorial.'<sup>102</sup> Bain Attwood has asserted that Lake Tyers was the first time when the claim of land rights based on aboriginality was applied to a settled aboriginal reserve. Due to the work of anthropologists like Barwick who stressed that historical associations did exist between Lake Tyers' aborigines and their land, campaigners increasingly began to use the term tribal lands to describe the reserve and established that residents had traditional rights to the land. This, along with the efforts of aboriginal organisations and campaigners to include Lake Tyers' residents in national discussions of land dispossession and encouraging them to realise their fight for land as a wider aboriginal struggle greatly shaped the campaign. The local significance of Lake Tyers was increasingly downplayed with it being regarded as 'one reserve in Australia out of many' and with the argument that 'certain principles' regarding ownership should

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<sup>101</sup> Letter from Residents of Lake Tyers to Aborigines Welfare Board (Melbourne) Requesting Permission to Leave the Reserve (with Signatures), 7 May 1963.

<<http://indigenoustrights.net.au/document.asp?iID=855>> accessed 20 January 2010.

<sup>102</sup> Taffe, *Black and White Together*, p. 175.



apply to all'<sup>103</sup>. Moreover, campaigners began to move away from purely attacking the policy of assimilation and instead justified its retention on the basis of traditional land rights despite Lake Tyers only being established in 1861.

It is possible to see this shift in numerous sources. For example, Attwood draws on the comparison between two Lake Tyers' protests. In a protest in May 1963, there was a complete absence of indigenous land rights with the retention of Lake Tyers largely presented in terms of equal rights and the personal attachment of residents to the land with placards reading 'Aborigines are Capable of Lake Tyers Management', 'Lake Tyers is Our Home: Let Us Have it' and 'Give us Justice'. However, two years later in a similar demonstration, protestors presented the Lake Tyers campaign as part of a wider campaign for land rights based on indigenous rights with placards reading 'Land Rights for Aborigines. Retain Lake Tyers', 'Secure Land Tenure for the Aborigines: Start with Lake Tyers' and 'Lake Tyers is Our Land.'<sup>104</sup>As mentioned earlier, the Council for Aboriginal Rights initially shaped the campaign around an attack on assimilation whilst acknowledging the local significance of Lake Tyers to its residents. However, by the end of the 1963 the Council had shifted its position. The Council repeatedly used the term land rights when defending the reserve and presented Lake Tyers as only one part of a national problem, emphasising that the 'special...status of aborigines living on reserves everywhere' was being considered by the Council which was making it 'clear that there must be a special form of land tenure granted to Aborigines so that ownership of reserves may not be superseded.'<sup>105</sup>

Though this shift in the campaign occurred sometime in 'the wake of Yirrkala', 1963, it did not represent a complete break from the earlier stage of the campaign. A reading of the campaign material and *The Age* articles illustrates that assimilation still remained a focus of attack in the Lake Tyers campaign throughout the 1960s and in this way, the campaign retained continuity. However, the reserve's retention based on land rights and its links with the national land rights movement only emerged from 1963 onwards and gradually became the main focus of the campaign. Indeed, prior to 1963, no Lake Tyers campaigner had presented the residents' claims to land in these terms. It is therefore possible to identify 1963 as a pivotal year for the development of the campaign.

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<sup>103</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 25 March 1963 and Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 14 May 1963.

<sup>104</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 237.

<sup>105</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 248.

This sense of continuity and discontinuity is evident in a 1963 leaflet supporting the retention of Lake Tyers produced by the Australian Communist Party. The leaflet continues to attack assimilation with it arguing that ‘a new policy is obviously necessary’. However, it primarily justifies the retention of the reserve by claiming that the aboriginal residents have indigenous, historical rights. Indeed, it begins its argument by describing the initial dispossession of land during colonisation whereby state governments ‘refused to recognise aboriginal ownership of former tribal territories’ and that no government has since attempted ‘to return to the aborigines or their descendants the land that was stolen from them.’<sup>106</sup>

Furthermore, it directly draws the Lake Tyers controversy into a national and international context. It conveys Lake Tyers as part of the burgeoning land rights movement by claiming that ‘the demand of the aborigines for ownership of the reserves is nation-wide and is gaining support’.<sup>107</sup> By placing Lake Tyers into an international context, the leaflet also seeks to highlight the discriminative practices of the Australian government. It states that ‘in many capitalist countries, eg. New Zealand, Canada, USA, the indigenous people have won the right to own part of their former territories....eventually the governments of Australia must be forced to accept Aboriginal ownership of reserves.’<sup>108</sup> This internationalisation of Lake Tyers became a crucial tactic in defending its retention. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the international and national events of the 1960s concerning racial equality helped gather public interest and support for Lake Tyers. However, it was also exploited by campaigners and used as one of their tactics.

Jennifer Clark argues that the rise of Australian aboriginal activism belonged within the context of international politics of race, and was strongly influenced and shaped by the 1960s phenomenon abroad.<sup>109</sup> The United Nation’s Human Rights Charter and International Labour Conference provided a set of ideals for aboriginal campaigners and gave the demands of the aboriginal movement international recognition. Furthermore, the terms of the convention and charter could always be used as political ammunition against the government and as such, formed part of the Lake Tyers campaign.<sup>110</sup> In a letter to *The Age* entitled ‘why retain Lake Tyers?’, Stan

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<sup>106</sup> Victorian State Executive of the Communist Party, ‘Lake Tyers and the Aborigines of Gippisland’.

<sup>107</sup> Victorian State Executive of the Communist Party, ‘Lake Tyers and the Aborigines of Gippisland’.

<sup>108</sup> Victorian State Executive of the Communist Party, ‘Lake Tyers and the Aborigines of Gippisland’.

<sup>109</sup> Clark, *Aboriginal Activism*, p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> Clark, *Aboriginal Activism*, p. 77.

Davey of the Victorian Advancement League wrote that ‘in Canada, USA, New Zealand, the indigenous people hold land by treaty rights, and their rights are recognised...And what about the United Nations International Labour Office Convention 107 and Human rights?’<sup>111</sup> Similarly, in a letter to *The Age* in 1965, the author attacked the government for its human rights abuses in the case of Lake Tyers. It stated, ‘would the government be prepared to set out its reasons for carrying out a programme that is opposed to the principles set out in Convention 107 of the I.L.O, an organisation of the United Nations?’<sup>112</sup>

Lake Tyers’ campaigners also sought to pressurise the commonwealth government by informing the outside world of Australia’s abuses towards its aborigines, thus capitalising on the international climate of racial equality. In May 1963, Shirley Andrews of the Council for Aboriginal Rights, made a speech at the United Nations seminar on the dictatorial role of police towards aborigines. Andrews claimed that ‘aborigines are the only people in this country who are liable to have their homes searched without warrants’ especially on missions and reserves where only the permission of the superintendent is needed. In defending this remark she specifically mentioned Lake Tyers whereby she had evidence that ‘the police are in the habit of walking straight into their home without even knocking...without any warrant or explanation.’<sup>113</sup> As a result, Australia’s treatment of aborigines was condemned before delegates and observers from every South East Asian country at the United Nations seminar causing much embarrassment to the Australian government.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, a month later, campaigners drew up a cable in the name of the Victorian Advancement League which they sent to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The cable accused the commonwealth government of ‘ignoring minority rights of aborigines’, and requested that an enquiry into the ongoing dispossession of aboriginal reserves be carried out, specifying Lake Tyers among several reserves.<sup>115</sup> Though these efforts were futile as United Nations’ members

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<sup>111</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 14 May 1963.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Conditions at Lake Tyers’, Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 7 April 1965.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Speech Made at U.N Seminar on the Role of the Police in the Protection of Human Rights by Miss Shirley Andrews, Observer from the Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights’, Canberra, 3 May 1963, at

<http://indigenoustrights.net.au/document.asp?iID=825> accessed 14 January 2010.

<sup>114</sup> ‘Australia Condemned on Treatment of Natives’, *The Age*, 4 May 1963.

<sup>115</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 255.

refused to interfere in Australian affairs, they did help degenerate Australia's international reputation which was already in jeopardy due to its relationship with Papua New Guinea and the White Australia Policy.<sup>116</sup>

What had previously been seen as a local and somewhat isolated struggle for land for the Lake Tyers' residents became drawn into a national and even international context due to the work of aboriginal campaigners, the development of the national land rights movement and events abroad. Moreover, with the Lake Tyers campaign increasingly being defended in terms of land rights based on aborigines' indigeneity, and on the basis of human rights and international standards, what was once a moral case for rights to land increasingly began to be seen as one that had legal basis as well.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Clark, *Aboriginal Activism*, p. 24.

<sup>117</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, p. 216.

## Chapter 5: Success

(i)

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1968, the Welfare Board was replaced by the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs with Mr Reg Worthy as director. From then on, state government policies towards aborigines underwent a ‘welcome metamorphosis’ that shifted from ‘paternalistic and condescending charity hand outs to the humane and realistic policy of consultation with aborigines...’<sup>118</sup> In the Ministry’s first annual report it declared its new direction for aboriginal affairs stating that ‘the Ministry has rejected politics of paternalism and expediency and espouses a programme which will lead ultimately to self-determination by aborigines.’<sup>119</sup> There was a radical departure from the former policy of welfare with the new goals of the Ministry being to ensure that aborigines were consulted by state authorities and that they had the same rights, privileges, and responsibilities as other citizens.

Worthy was a dominant figure in instigating change at Lake Tyers. One of his first acts as director was to visit Lake Tyers and cut the padlock of the gate as a symbol of a ‘new era in aboriginal affairs’.<sup>120</sup> Across the state, Worthy introduced new housing loans and initiatives to help make aborigines become independent. At Lake Tyers he made vital changes including removing the restriction that residents could not have visitors, allowing them to own vehicles and paying wages to residents rather than having them rely on a hand-out system. New homes with modern facilities were erected on the reserve and the dilapidated cottages were demolished. The result was that over the next four years, the ‘area had undergone a complete change’ with residents effectively running their own farm under limited white management.<sup>121</sup>

Worthy believed that in order for the Lake Tyers’ aborigines to become independent, they must be given security of land tenure and opportunities to develop the reserve. He recognised their inability to be absorbed into the white community and was keen to give them the rights and responsibilities that had been withheld from them by the Welfare Board.<sup>122</sup> Pressured by the Ministry and Worthy himself, the Victorian state government finally awarded 4000 acres at the reserve to the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust under the Aboriginal Lands Act, 1970. In 1971 the deeds were

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<sup>118</sup> ‘The New Awareness’, *The Age*, 12 Dec 1968.

<sup>119</sup> Broome, *A Man of All Tribes*, p. 155.

<sup>120</sup> Peter Renkin (Interviewed by G. Davey), Bringing Them Home Oral History Project, Recorded 12 Oct 2000 (National Library of Australia).

<sup>121</sup> Jackomos, ‘History of Lake Tyers’, p. 8.

<sup>122</sup> Peter Renkin, Bringing Them Home Oral History Project.

formally handed over to the Trust in a public ceremony with the Trust taking full responsibility for its own affairs.

(ii)

‘This is our land and we are proud of it. After all, you white fellows weren’t the first to discover Australia- we were here first...’

‘The granting of land tenure for Lake Tyers has opened the door to land rights for all aborigines. This is the biggest thing in the history of the aboriginal people of Australia. It will have a big impact on the other states. We have fought for this with bitter experience but the winds of change are blowing. Now we have the chance to prove ourselves by working for our own destiny...’<sup>123</sup>

This dissertation has not attempted to give a comprehensive examination of the campaign to save Lake Tyers nor has it solely focused on the question of its success. However, in its examination of the main issues involved in the campaign it has uncovered some of the key factors for the campaign’s success but this has by no means been exhausted due to time constraints. By focusing on the role of campaigners, this dissertation has somewhat neglected the Welfare Board’s actions and policies towards Lake Tyers which changed throughout the campaign. Future study of the Welfare Board in this period would greatly enhance the understanding of the campaign and help explain how it achieved its aims. The study of state policies is particularly important when trying to establish why the Lake Tyers campaign succeeded when other campaigns for land across the country did not. The treatment of aborigines differed greatly from state to state with Queensland and the Northern Territory having the strictest legislation and regimes concerning aborigines.<sup>124</sup> Perhaps the campaign to save Lake Tyers would have failed if located in a less lenient state? Indeed, the success of the campaign cannot be measured by the efforts of campaigners alone but is also dependant on the actions of the state government and bodies in charge of aboriginal affairs which has not been fully explored here.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify important factors to the campaign’s success from this dissertation. Though the trigger may have been Worthy’s administration, without the work of campaigners, Lake Tyers would have most likely of been closed soon after the Board’s announcement in 1962. Undoubtedly, the involvement of white campaigners and the support of the white public were of crucial importance to the campaign. With the aboriginal population of Australia comprising of less than 2% of

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<sup>123</sup> Speech made by aboriginal resident Charlie Carter at the handover of land title, 1971 in Jackomos, ‘History of Lake Tyers’, p. 8.

<sup>124</sup> Chesterman, *Citizens Without Rights*, p. 8.

the total population, aboriginal political action without mainstream support would always be futile.<sup>125</sup> White public support, press coverage and the involvement of white campaigners were vital to pressurising the Welfare Board and in achieving the aims of the Lake Tyers campaign. Before the work of white activists and multiracial organisations, the demands of the Lake Tyers' aborigines for land tenure had practically gone unnoticed by the public and the state government. From 1963 onwards with the increase in the number of aboriginal organisations involved in the campaign and growing public discontent over assimilation, Lake Tyers appeared frequently in Victorian papers and became very much part of the white public consciousness, making aboriginal demands widely known. Lake Tyers was an aboriginal campaign in the sense that it was initiated by the local demands of aborigines, presented as an aboriginal struggle and participated by the aborigines of Lake Tyers, however none of it would have been possible without the support of white campaigners.

The fact that the campaign occurred in the 1960s is also of paramount importance in understanding its success and development. The changes occurring in the 1960s in Australia and abroad generated public interest and support for the Lake Tyers campaign and also shaped the campaign itself. Indeed, whilst the demands of the Lake Tyers campaign for land tenure remained static throughout the 1960s, the campaign itself did not. What was initially a local campaign motivated by the residents' personal attachments to land rapidly transformed according to the political climate. The early phase of the campaign (1961-1963) was dominated by a two pronged approach which attacked assimilation and used the personal attachments of residents to their land as justification for the reserve's retention. Benefitting from the growing contention over assimilation, Lake Tyers' residents found a receptive audience to their demands. Meanwhile, campaigners understood the personal motivations of Lake Tyers' aborigines repeatedly stating that it had 'special significance for Victorian Aborigines who see it as their own property, the only piece of Victoria left to them.'<sup>126</sup>

In the wake of Yirrkala in 1963 and with the involvement of national organisations the campaign gradually transformed, this time subsumed in the national land rights movement with the reserve's retention based on the concept of traditional

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<sup>125</sup> Taffe, *Black and White Together*, p. 18.

<sup>126</sup> Council for Aboriginal Rights, *Struggle for Dignity*, p. 11.

land rights. An examination of campaign materials and letters to *The Age* has shown that this change did not happen immediately or consistently with assimilation still being seen as one of the main obstacles to Lake Tyers' retention. However, it is possible to identify a shift in 1963, with increasing numbers of articles and campaign materials using the term land rights. Indeed, by the handover of land title in 1971, Charlie Carter used this term and despite Lake Tyers being established in 1861 declared 'this is our land and we are proud of it. After all, you white fellows weren't the first discover Australia- we were here first...'<sup>127</sup> As a result of being part of the national land rights movement, the local significance of Lake Tyers was increasingly removed as it was drawn into a national context and regarded as 'one reserve out of many'.<sup>128</sup> Even the aboriginal residents had been drawn into a broader understanding of their aboriginality and their struggle for land due to the work of campaigners to foster a sense of national aboriginal community and involvement. Indeed, when land tenure was finally handed over Carter declared '...Lake Tyers has opened the door to land rights for all aborigines.'<sup>129</sup>

Fortunately, for the residents of Lake Tyers, the reserve's closure and the following campaign was made in the pivotal period of the 1960s which Jennifer Clark argues was the best time for the development of aboriginal organisations and campaigns all over the world as racial issues were capturing the imagination of black and white.<sup>130</sup> White campaigners in Australia were beginning to work alongside aborigines, thus providing a crucial ally for the minority group and attitudes to race at home and abroad were also changing, helping to gather public support. Though the Lake Tyers campaign may have lost its local significance in becoming part of the wider land rights movement, it also gained strength and impetus as part of a federal movement. Unlike the other land rights campaigns of the 1960s, it was able to reclaim its significance by becoming the first success, thus becoming 'the biggest thing' to have happened in the 'history of the aboriginal people of Australia.'<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Jackomos, 'History of Lake Tyers', p. 8.

<sup>128</sup> Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 14 May 1963.

<sup>129</sup> Jackomos, 'History of Lake Tyers', p. 8.

<sup>130</sup> Clark, *Aboriginal Activism*, p. 141.

<sup>131</sup> Jackomos, 'History of Lake Tyers', p. 8.



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## Appendices

### Figure one.

#### Timeline of the Campaign

**1947** - Australia Aborigines League set out a programme which insists that Lake Tyers becomes the property of aborigines.

**1956** – Laurie Moffat travels to Melbourne and presents the editor of *The Sun* with a letter from the people of Lake Tyers asking they be allowed to remain there permanently and run their own farm.

**1957** - Publication of the Mclean Report. Mclean recommends a policy of active assimilation and the reduction of Lake Tyers to cater just for the old, sick and infirm.

**1961** - Lake Tyers' aboriginal elder, Laurie Moffat approaches the Council for Aboriginal Rights in Melbourne for support in making reforms on Lake Tyers. Council for Aboriginal Rights agree to help Moffat and send delegation to the reserve to investigate in December. They also make Moffat and another Lake Tyers' resident part of the Council.

**1962** - The Aborigines Welfare Board announces that Lake Tyers is to be closed. A date for the closure is not given.

Over the next few months the Council lead the campaign to save Lake Tyers. They issue appeals to save it and help organise a petition by residents of the reserve which is presented to Parliament in October 1962.

**1963 (March-Aug)** - Numerous organisations and individuals join the campaign, including the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement and anthropologist, Diane Barwick.

**1963 (April)** - Doug Nicholls resigns from Welfare Board over their decision to close Lake Tyers.

**1963 (May)** - Protest march to Melbourne headed by Nicholls. Forty Lake Tyers' residents march to Parliament in Melbourne and present a petition demanding the absolute retention of Lake Tyers. The march receives huge publicity and press coverage.

**1965** - Lake Tyers is declared a permanent reserve by the Welfare Board. It is a small gain for the save Lake Tyers campaign. Permanent status means the reserve cannot be broken up and leased to white farmers but does not protect the tenure of aboriginal residents. Also, a permanent reserve is only permanently reserved until government decides it is temporary and its status can be revoked in a single parliamentary sitting.

**1966** - Welfare Board agrees to a new five year scheme to develop Lake Tyers as a training and rehabilitation centre for aborigines. The plans will cost \$130,000 over next two years. The full amount is not implemented but some improvements are made on Lake Tyers.

**1967** - Welfare Board is dissolved.

**1968** - The Welfare Board is replaced by the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs with Reg Worthy as Director.

**1970** - Aboriginal Lands Act awards 4000 acres to the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust.

**1971** - The land title of Lake Tyers is handed over to the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust in a public ceremony held on the reserve.



**Figure Three.**



A photograph of the houses on Lake Tyers.

**Source:** (Photographer Not Known), Date Not Known at

<http://www.mabonativetitle.com/info/lakeTyersPeopleHouses.htm> accessed 15 February 2010.

**Figure Four.**



A photograph of the primary school on Lake Tyers.

**Source:** Reproduced with the permission of the Keeper of Public Records, Public Record Office of Victoria, PROV 14514/P1/25 at

<http://indigenoustrights.net.au/document.asp?iID=849> accessed 20 January 2010.



**Figure Five.**



Photograph of the Lake Tyers march in Melbourne, 22 May 1963.

**Source:** (Photographer Not Known), Courtesy of Ian Spalding at <http://www.indigenoustrights.net.au/document.asp?iID=915> accessed 28 January 2010.

