

Friends of Caroline Chisholm

NEWSLETTER

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The first article in this issue recounts the importance Archibald Chisholm gave to family reunion in his honorary work as Secretary of the Family Colonization Loan Society in Melbourne in the early to mid 1850s. In this he and Caroline were of one mind.

In a matter-of-fact letter to the *Argus*, he did not disguise his pleasure at meeting a widowed mother on one of the Society's ships and next fortuitously reaching ashore the eldest son, who had remitted money for their reunion, before he returned to the goldfields.

These elements are combined in the first article. The widow and her children are named, and

a little of their personal and family histories is conveyed. The objective and general sweep of this aspect of the Chisholms' work are encapsulated in one reunited family.

The broader expanse of Caroline Chisholm's life and work is creatively realized in *The Emigrant's Friend*, Richard Conlon's play, which is reviewed in the second article.

Conlon's play, published in Australia last month, is anything but a costumed historical drama, which is what George Landen Dann's previous (1939) play about Mrs Chisholm could be called. Creative writers and artists have insights to reveal about her.

Family Colonization and Family Reunion

The *Athenian* was the third ship chartered by the Family Colonization Loan Society, whose instigator and principal founder was Caroline Chisholm. The ship left Gravesend on 27 September, 1851 and arrived in Melbourne at the end of February, 1852. The voyage took so long because the 560 ton *Athenian* was a barque, some of which were notoriously slow vessels.

Archibald Chisholm's report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 17 July, 1852 stated 209 adult emigrants were aboard but gave no count of the children. (The adults may have been "statute adults" which factored in children.) The newly-arrived emigrants or others had deposited £2,094 with the Society for their fares, and the Society had loaned them the remaining £524.

Among the first whom Archibald met on board was Mrs Ann Chipperton, a widow, and three of her children. Her gold-mining son had recently remitted through the Society £20 towards their reunion in Victoria. Archibald straight away went to the son's Melbourne lodgings to alert him to his family's arrival. Archibald relates, "I was fortunate enough to find him as he was about starting for Mount

Alexander; he would have been off that morning only that a little accident happened to the party's dray" [letter to the *Argus*, 12 March, 1852].

Archibald's letter continued, Mrs Chipperton called to his office a few days later and asked that the remittance be used to repay the Society's entire loan of £13 10s. as well as £2 of the £4 loan from a kindly lady in London. The remainder went towards fitting out two sons for the diggings. "May success attend them!", Archibald wrote.

Mrs Chipperton had five children in all — William, Joseph, Emma, Charles and Edward — according to her 1880 entry in the death register. It recorded that she had died of "Paralysis", aged 80, and that Charles was dead. (It appears that he probably died in infancy in London.)

William, the eldest, was the gold-mining son whose remittance repaid the Society's loan to Mrs Chipperton. He came to Melbourne as an assisted emigrant on the *Caroline Agnes* in 1849.

Joseph was the second eldest. Aged 22 when he arrived in Melbourne, he was the other son

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Family Colonization and Family Reunion (continued)

Archibald stated had been fitted out for the gold diggings. The research for this article did not trace him. For the rest of the family, there is an historical trail, chiefly from death register entries and, for Emma, her marriage and death register entries.

Emma, aged 17, married James Gilmore in St Peter's Anglican Church, Eastern Hill, in November, 1852. She and James went on to have nine children, all of whom were alive at the time of her death in January, 1899. She died in Brighton, a Melbourne suburb looking out on Port Phillip.

Whether she had remained in Melbourne throughout her marriage is not known. A news report in the *Bendigo Advertiser* of 5 September, 1894 mentions her (married) name and relationship to Edward Chipperton, the youngest. Subject to fits since the age of two, Edward had drowned at Kingower on the morning of 4 September.

That morning he had been with his brother William, and went to get some wood, crossing land having abandoned mine workings. When he did not return, a search was made. It was Emma who discovered Edward's body, head down in a six-foot hole with two feet of water. The death register recorded his "drowning while in an Epileptic fit" and that he was "Not Married" and had "Nil" children.

William lived another eleven years, dying in June, 1905. Like his brother, he died in Kingower, and was described as "Single" and having "Nil" children. The cause of death, at the age of 72,



"Gold Washing at Ballarat"
Samuel Sidney's *The Three Colonies of Australia*, London, 1853, page 280.

was "Accidental Burning". James Gilmore, his nephew, was the informant named on the death register entry for William.

The family, reunited under the auspices of the Family Colonization Loan Society, looks to have kept together despite the turbulence of the gold-rush years and the passage of time. What became of Joseph, the widow Chipperton's second lad? Did he, unlike his brothers, marry and have children? We don't know.

"The Reunion of Families" was the heading of Archibald's earlier-mentioned letter to the *Argus*. In that letter and others to the same and different newspapers, he emphasised the Society's role in bringing about family reunion, over and above the emigration of families as a unit. Archibald ended his *Argus* letter with a reference to seven Irish orphan girls. They hadn't travelled on the Society's chartered ships, but were servants employed in Melbourne who had been remitting money for family members to join them.

"[O]ne poor girl came the other day, accompanied by her master and mistress, and sent of her wages, £19 1s., to get out her father and sister, her master generously advancing her . . . £5", Archibald writes. His admiration for this girl and the others is evident. Though obviously not an orphan, she had come from an Irish workhouse, which was where Earl Grey's much-criticised scheme of 1848-50 recruited 14 to 18 year olds during Ireland's Great Famine.

Caroline Chisholm, still working in London, would doubtless have been very pleased with such affirming anecdotes. And she would certainly have endorsed Archibald's sage observation that "the links of nature are stronger and more durable than the links of gold" [letter to the *Argus*, 27 December, 1851].

We hope to have in the next issue an article about other emigrants who arrived on the *Athenian* in February, 1852. They are Edward and Mary Mitchell and their two children. They, too, went to the goldfields.

A New Play about Caroline Chisholm

The *Emigrant's Friend*, a play written in 2006 for Caroline Chisholm School, Northampton, has just been published in Australia. Richard Conlon, the playwright, achieves a great deal in two acts, which the Devising group calculate would run for about 90 minutes.

The Devising group are six present-day students who are part of the play they are planning. This group have a range of abilities, and their deliberations and observations on the action and other characters are leavened by short, often witty exchanges. Misunderstandings of one another and Caroline Chisholm, the pivotal character, are one of the playwright's means of engaging not just present-day students but the play's audience.

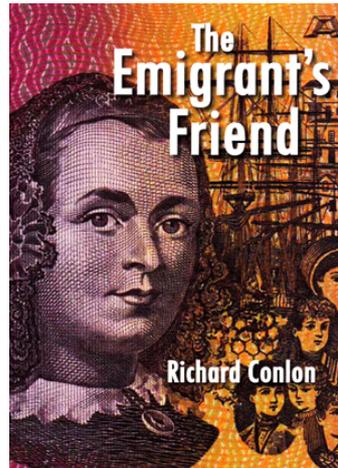
The pivotal character is not quite correct, for there can be as many as six Caroline Chisholms. The playwright's Notes suggest, if not six, there should be at least two: the young and the old Caroline. To Old Caroline is given the most demanding part, and she is present throughout the play's two acts and 25 scenes.

The Chorus, whose number is left open, begin immediately the two to six Carolines have spoken: "I am Caroline". The Chorus have no oracular function; they are mainly scene-setters and commentators of the everyday. Even so, they speak most movingly about Mrs Chisholm's grave at the beginning of the play and at its end:

Shaded from the warmth of summer sun
by tree above,
cloaked in autumn leaf,
soft snowfall and spring bulb,
year after year.

Another six cast members are in the Northampton scenes, some also in later scenes; eight are required for India; and the scenes in Australia call for more than a dozen individual roles and eight groups, such as Dray Girls and Ex-Cons, whose numbers are flexible.

Completing the cast are two Spectres, one an Aboriginal child and the other an Indian girl. The Aboriginal child is with Old Caroline in the first scene, and the Indian girl appears at her side in scene seven. They stay, remaining silent. Occasionally they move gracefully about (not dancing), as music from their ancient cultures is heard, and



The new play is published by, and available from, Phoenix Education, www.phoenixeduc.com \$19.95 RRP 978-1-921586-72-9

they join in young Caroline's games. Old Caroline acknowledges what to her is a felt presence, and she speaks directly to them. Although she does not see the Aboriginal child, she says:

"You come so close now, when you have been at the edge for so long. You have waited all this time. You waited and I watched your waiting, but from a distance."

To the Indian girl, Old Caroline says:

"Again those eyes. Eyes that penetrate, eyes that seem to see to the heart. Do they? . . . to my core? And if they do — do they understand, do they forgive? Is it even for them to forgive — or for me?"

It is the Aboriginal child's "lack of words which accuses most" and causes Old Caroline to fill the silence, she says, with "my own thoughts, my own accusations. Mea Culpa".

But for what? The short answer from Old Caroline is addressed to the Indian girl in scene seven: "I only knew of how to help my own — to make a difference — some small difference". Here is the pith of the play. The famous, hard-working Mrs Chisholm had helped her own: Europeans in Colonial settings, but not the indigenous people.

This searing judgment is Old Caroline's, but the claim she ignored the indigenous people's plight is raised later by others. Yet nothing they put forward is as sharp as Old Caroline's end-of-life review.

She holds herself to very high standards indeed, and that review could equally be termed

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A New Play about Caroline Chisholm (continued)

an examination of conscience. Looking back on a busy, fulfilling and generous life, Old Caroline does not spare herself or proffer excuses. The playwright surely understands her.

This is evident in the licence he provides to censorious, harping and ill-informed others in the play:

“Popish plot if you ask me. Things were better before she came . . .” and “so holier than thou” — Gossips group; and

“How dare she tell us how to live — Mrs high & mighty!” — Ex-Cons group.

Their charges don't stick. They fail as soon as they are uttered, whether being refuted by, for example, “She has shown me nothing but kindness” (Dock Girl), or by the playwright's juxtaposition of situations and characters. It is Old Caroline's doubts as she looks back and reassesses that do not get dismissed.

The play is complex, compressing much into its two acts. Caroline Chisholm's personal history and circumstances are neatly handled. Much of the complexity arises from how her good works and good intentions are scrutinized within the play, particularly the overlaying of contributions

from the Devising group and, less so, other groups. The character of Old Caroline and the presence of the two Spectres are the play's strengths.

Interesting and challenging topics are introduced, but perhaps too many to deal with in two acts. Some are of such seriousness that the participants and the audience might need them to be weighed in the balance. To require that is probably to ask too much of a play written for performance by secondary school students.

The play's ending steps away from any final and deliberate weighing up. The Chorus once more speak about Mrs Chisholm's earthly resting place. The mix of Victorian, Indian and Aboriginal music heard at the play's beginning is heard again, and the teenage chatter of the Devising group peters out. In silence, the group's members, as they leave, each place a flower on the grave. It is a fitting tribute.

The exact ending, after the full cast of Carolines have come on stage, is also most fitting . . . and thought provoking.

Rodney Stinson

News items

Our England correspondent, Carole Walker, has early news of two developments, both connected with the Caroline Chisholm School in Northampton, the school for which Richard Conlon wrote his play, reviewed above.

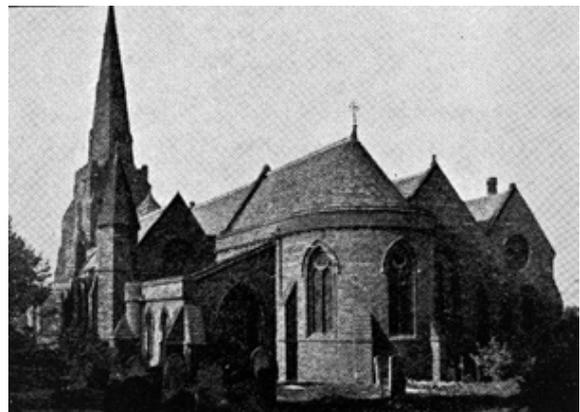
Students at the school have prepared designs for a new stained glass window at the historic Holy Sepulchre Church in Northampton, where Caroline Chisholm was baptised and married. An Anglican Church, it was built in Norman times. It is not seen at its best in this grainy image, copied from Mary Hoban's *Fifty-one Pieces of Wedding Cake*, page 33.

The designs depicting Caroline Chisholm have been submitted to the parish council, and a decision is likely in the near future.

The students at Caroline Chisholm School — actually, the school community as a whole —

are raising funds to restore the grave and headstone of Caroline and Archibald in the Billing Road cemetery, Northampton.

To see some recent images of the grave, headstone and surrounds, Google “Billing Road cemetery Northampton”.



Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Northampton