

Percival Serle (1871-1951), though working as an accountant, began systematic collection of biographical information in 1929. He went on to write all entries for his *Dictionary of Australian Biography*, whose two volumes were published in 1949 and remained a useful reference for “some forty years” [cf. [www.adb.online.anu.edu.au](http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au) – entry for Percival Serle]. His entry for Caroline Chisholm is reproduced here. It was sourced from <http://gutenberg.net.au>.

Caroline Chisholm (1808-1877), philanthropist, was the daughter of William Jones, a yeoman farmer at Wootton in Northamptonshire. Her latest biographer, Margaret Swann, states that she was born “about the year 1800”, but as Sir George Gipps, who met her in 1841, described her as “a young woman”, it seems more likely that the statement in the introductory memoir to the *Emigrants Guide* (1853) that she was born “in May 1808, at Northampton”, is correct. When she was a child, her father took into his house a poor maimed soldier, and pointed out to the children their obligations to the man who had fought for them. This no doubt was the germ from which developed the sense of responsibility that was the basis of Mrs Chisholm’s life work.

At 22 years of age she married Captain Archibald Chisholm, a quiet, studious man, who sympathized with his wife’s feelings on social questions. Two years later Captain Chisholm was sent to Madras, and while living there Mrs Chisholm realized the neglect from which the children of the soldiers were suffering, and especially the moral dangers to the girls. She founded “the female school of industry for the daughters of European soldiers”, in which the children were instructed in reading, writing and religion, cooking, housekeeping and nursing. It was an admirable institution, and when the Chisholms went to Australia in 1838 it was taken over by the government.

After travelling for some time in southern Australia the family settled near Sydney. It was soon discovered that many of the immigrants, both men and women, were destitute, and Mrs Chisholm began to make efforts to find situations for the girls. While they were waiting she frequently took them into her own home. In 1841 her husband went back to India, but it was thought best for the health of their three children that Mrs Chisholm should remain in Australia. There had been a great influx of immigrants in 1839 and 1840, and Mrs Chisholm decided that a home must be established for the young girls. Everyone she spoke to acknowledged the need, but no one would give her practical help. She went to the governor, Sir George Gipps, and after several interviews was granted the use of part of an old building known as the Immigration Barracks. It was overrun with rats, and Mrs Chisholm afterwards gave a vivid account of the first night she spent in her own room in the building, and the rats that visited her. At one time 13 were visible, and there were never less than seven. However, the rats were destroyed, four more rooms, a registry office and a school were added, and when the work became known the leading clergymen of the city gave their help and subscriptions began to come in from the general public.

Mrs Chisholm’s success came largely from her business-like habits. Having got her building <sup>(a)</sup> and ascertained the needs of the immigrants, she sent out circular letters inquiring the number of girls and men for which positions could be found in country districts. One of these, sent to the Rev. Henry Styles, an Anglican clergyman at Windsor, brought a reply giving the information, but declining to co-operate with her because it was natural to suppose that a lady who was a member of the Roman Catholic Church would use her institution for proselytizing purposes. Mrs Chisholm, however, assured Mr Styles that in the matters of religion the immigrants would be referred to their respective clergy, and so satisfied her correspondent that he sent her £2 and promised her “every support I am able to afford”. Mrs Chisholm kept her word and never misused her influence.

Her difficulties were great, for many of the girls were quite ignorant, others were wayward, and her patience was often much tried. Her patience, however, was seldom wasted, and presently help came in various ways which greatly increased her powers of well-doing. She found that the real need for female immigrants was in the country, and she formed parties of girls whom she personally placed with people of good character. Judge Therry in his *Reminiscences*, recounts how he once met Mrs Chisholm on a country road, seated on a dray with 12 or 14 young girls seated around her, while about 30 others walked alongside the dray, the walking girls taking their seats on the dray in turns. Wherever Mrs Chisholm went, the inn-keepers refused payment for her accommodation, other people provided horses, drays and provisions, and if one of her charges fell sick, a passing coach would carry her free. When the immigrants were placed in service, they knew that if they had any just cause for complaint, it was only necessary to write to Mrs Chisholm to find a powerful friend. But there were few

complaints on either side, for she drew up just agreements of which one went to the master, one to the servant and a third copy was filed. Before Mrs Chisholm began her work disputes about wages were common in the courts, but of the thousands of agreements she drew up only two were the subject of actions. Mrs Chisholm also found time to deal with many abuses that were taking place on emigrant ships, and succeeded in obtaining many improvements. She realized too that what settlers wanted most was land of their own, but the opposition of the large landowners made it difficult for much to be done at this time.

In 1845 Captain Chisholm returned to Australia and was able to help his wife in her work. She was anxious to encourage the settlement of families, and prepared much useful information, which was printed for the use of working people in England. Early in 1846 Captain and Mrs Chisholm decided to return to England, and on 14 April they sailed in the *Dublin*. Mrs Chisholm, during her six years in Australia, had looked after the welfare of 11,000 immigrants. Before sailing she was presented with a piece of plate which had been subscribed to by all classes in the community. In England she worked ceaselessly to have means provided for the children of both free emigrants and convicts who had been left in England, often in workhouses, to be restored to their parents. She had the usual repulses in official circles, but persevered to eventual success. She opened an emigration office in London and founded a Family Colonization Loan Society. In July 1847 she gave evidence before the select committee of the House of Lords on colonization from Ireland, the best first-hand account of Mrs Chisholm's views on emigration and the work done by her in Australia.

Early in 1848 she enrolled the first member of the Family Colonization Loan Society, and by the end of 1849 had the names of 200 people, who paid the greater part of their passage money in small instalments. The matter was brought before influential people interested in the question, including Lord Ashley, the Countess of Pembroke, the Right Hon. Sydney Herbert and others. A committee was formed to raise funds to help deserving emigrants, and in September 1850 the first chartered ship sailed with 250 passengers, and several other ships followed at intervals. Captain Chisholm, who was honorary secretary to the society, proceeded to Australia in 1852 to superintend operations on the arrival of the settlers, and in 1854 Mrs Chisholm and her five children left for Australia to rejoin her husband. The discovery of gold had made it unnecessary to advocate emigration from England, and by this period hundreds of thousands had found their way to the diggings. Mrs Chisholm and her husband, who had now reached the honorary rank of major, remained with their family in Melbourne for some time, and then removed to Kyneton. She fought hard for the unlocking of the lands, but early in 1858<sup>(b)</sup> broke down in health, and in 1858 a move was made to Sydney. There she continued her efforts to put the people on the land, for early closing of shops, for shorter hours generally, and for better housing conditions. In 1862 she found herself in financial difficulties and opened a boarding school, first at Newtown and then at Tempe. In 1866 she returned to England, and in 1867 was granted a civil list pension by the British government, of £100 a year. She died on 25 March 1877 and was buried at Northampton. She was survived by her husband, who died a few months later, and several children.

Mrs Chisholm was a woman who saw clearly what needed doing, and then did it, for she was deterred by no difficulties. Her thorough kindness of heart and complete self-abnegation eventually won their way with everyone who came in contact with her, but she could never have done a tithe of the great work she did if she had not had great powers of organization, and that divine common sense which is the best kind of wisdom. She was fortunate in her husband, who encouraged her and worked with her in every possible way. No greater woman has been connected with Australia.

*Sessional Papers of the House of Lords*, vol. 23, p. 407; Margaret Swann, *Caroline Chisholm: the Immigrants' Friend*; Samuel Sidney, *The Three Colonies of Australia*; Eneas Mackenzie, *Memoir in The Emigrant's Guide to Australia*; Eneas Mackenzie, *Memoirs of Mrs Caroline Chisholm*; Roger Therry, *Reminiscences*; *Historical Records of Australia*, ser. I vols. XXIII to XXVI; Margaret Swann, *Journal and Proceedings Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. VI, pp. 134-51; *The Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1877, p. 6, for date of death.

Notes:

- (a) These circular letters were sent out before the Home was established in October, 1841.
- (b) The adverse effects of the kidney disease were manifested in 1857.