

Friends of Caroline Chisholm

NEWSLETTER

16
January 2018



Published by Friends of Caroline Chisholm GPO Box 2171 Sydney NSW 2001 www.mrschisholm.com

This issue has a detailed review of Sarah Goldman's *Caroline Chisholm: An Irresistible Force*, which has been released as an e-book and in hardcover. Dr Carole Walker, the reviewer, is the most recent of the major biographers, and her own work was rigorously researched and has contributed to the historical record and our understanding of Caroline Chisholm. The editorial team are pleased (and relieved) that the new biography has such a competent, knowledgeable reviewer.

Mrs Chisholm's life and work continue to attract and hold the attention of many, and not a few artists and writers have imagined and portrayed

the great woman in their own way. A.C. Hayter's original portrait and Thomas Fairland's image based on it both bring a depth of meaning in seemingly different settings. We're had poetry, a spread of novels, some plays, folk songs, and a musical. Theirs is an imaginative portrayal, whose success and appeal depend primarily on artistic merit. By contrast, historical biography, as our reviewer states, is "based on fact—it is non-fiction". Margaret Kiddle, the first major biographer, wrote a sound academic history and relegated her imaginings to *West of Sunset*, a novel for teenagers. Now as then, Caroline Chisholm has no need of embellishment.

Dr Carole Walker's Review of Sarah Goldman's Biography

Caroline Chisholm: An Irresistible Force

by Sarah Goldman,

Harper Collins, 2017, 344pp, \$39.99 [HB]

The Kindle edition was used for this review.

It must be very encouraging for Goldman to see the reviews of her book and to be called upon to give interviews. It is also helpful for readers to learn the background to her writing a biography of Caroline Chisholm. One of the more enlightening aspects of the interviews that struck a cord with me was the fact that Goldman had originally "written a novel of some eighty-three thousand words based on her research about Caroline". (*The NSW Writers Centre, Spotlight on: Sarah Goldman*.) When I read *An Irresistible Force* I was forcibly struck with the idea that Goldman must have had difficulty in deciding whether she wanted to write a novel or a biography. It now makes complete sense. One can only sympathise with Goldman that having written and submitted an eighty-three thousand word manuscript for a novel on Chisholm to then be told that, although her work was well liked, there was no interest "in a novel so much as a fresh biography of Caroline" (*NSW Writers Centre*, as above). I was almost tempted to follow Goldman's style of writing and write an imaginative paragraph on how Goldman would have felt having spent a considerable time on a novel and then being asked to write a biography. Almost. Goldman must have been devastated. You can easily imagine that she would not have wanted to waste all that work, and hence came up with the idea of writing a biography with imaginative introductions (in italics) to many of the chapters reverting, as Goldman states, to factual information in normal script. Here lies one of the major problems of many problems in her book.

We all understand that historical fiction is past events used by the author to imaginatively reconstruct that historical event and reconstruct historical personages from that era. Modern research into what is historical biography is very complicated and controversial.

Dr Carole Walker's Review of Sarah Goldman's Biography

However, a simplification of the definition is that historical biography expresses interest in the individual, and that individual's place in culture and society. It is an interdisciplinary study covering other genres and subjects such as politics, social relations, economics as well as other related subjects (Professor Biritte Possing, *Biography Historical*, The Danish National Archive, page 9). Importantly it is based on fact – it is non-fiction. Goldman states in her introduction (loc 381, 2%) that she has “adhered to the evidence and facts of Caroline's life”. She does differentiate her historical fiction by italics but in the factual (normal font) writing she so very often imaginatively interprets/fictionalises that factual evidence, as will be demonstrated below.

Reading Goldman's work I was also forcibly struck by the thought that she had wider horizons in mind and was writing with a screen play/episodic TV drama series in mind. How much more exciting to portray Caroline as the six year old girl being kicked out of the home by the wicked mother who could no longer tolerate her dead husband's illegitimate child and as a sexy flirtatious independent woman who could so easily have had an affair whilst hubby was serving in India. This is hardly “adhering to the evidence and facts of Caroline's life”. They are imaginative interpretations of the facts. Such interpretations do not serve Chisholm well.

A further problem is that *An Irresistible Force*, although a well-written book that flows easily and draws the reader in, it does not add any significant information and substantiated research. Goldman has added very little to our knowledge of Chisholm; she relies heavily on secondary sources: Hoban, Kiddle, Eneas Mackenzie, David Mackenzie, Moran, Pearson, Stevens-Chambers, Stinson and my book and doctoral thesis. Goldman cannot claim that there are no new primary sources to be found. Rodney Stinson has just recently discovered a new novelette by Chisholm: *Domestic Life in Australia*, and I was able to substantiate (through archival information in America) that Florence Nightingale did indeed work with Chisholm before going to the Crimea.

Goldman however implies that she has found new evidence. In her reply to the question of 'Process', in the interview with Bill Wadholloway of *The Australian Legend*, she stated that: “one valuable resource was Edith Pearson's essay on Caroline”. Pearson's essay in *Ideals and Realities*, published in 1914, is a chatty religious discourse that contains many errors. The misinformation of Chisholm's birth place, and of her father's status, the muddled information of the birth of Caroline's son Sydney and the misattribution of the painting that now hangs in The State Library in Sydney to Sir George Hayter, Queen Victoria's portrait artist (it was painted by Angelo Coleen Hayter). Yet Goldman states Pearson's essay was a valuable resource and uses Pearson's information to relate the story of an “elderly Catholic priest, a Frenchman escaping the revolution across the Channel” (loc 472, 4%) being taken into the Jones family home by Chisholm's father, William. Goldman writes that the: “story, [was] told by the essayist Edith Pearson and attributed to one of Caroline's daughters” (loc 483, 4%). Prior to Pearson's essay it had been documented that William took a wounded soldier into the home (stemming from Eneas Mackenzie's biographies in the 1850s and thereafter related by further biographers until Pearson in 1914.) Pearson's information stems from conversations with Chisholm's sixty-six year old daughter Caroline. One wonders just how well Caroline junior remembered the stories her mother had told her when she was young and may have been confused and suggested a priest was befriended by the family rather than a maimed soldier. Pearson then assumes that there are two similar such stories. Chisholm herself relating her childhood memories to her daughter could well have been confused. She was only six when her father died. Kiddle (1957, page 3) certainly believed that the “legendary” story that “a refugee French priest, whom her father had befriended,

Dr Carole Walker's Review of Sarah Goldman's Biography

first turned her [Chisholm's] thoughts towards Catholicism" had "no basis in fact." I too cannot find any substantiated confirmation of this "legendary" story (*A Saviour of Living Cargoes*, page 10).

Goldman also draws on Pearson's story that was related to her by Caroline Chisholm junior that spoke of a:

"small child . . . that one night, when living with an aged lady in Northampton, a burglar got into the house. Both little girl and old lady heard him and got up. When they came out of their room he was at the foot of the staircase, they on the top. The child immediately, with the presence of mind of a grown person, thought of a bunk of picked coal on the landing, and the little creature, assisted by the old woman, showered down on the surprised marauder, with all the force they had great lumps of coal. Such good aim was made, that the man's flight was speedy; but not before the brave child's chin received a life-scar from his returning missile of coal. (Pearson, page 92)

From this Goldman assumes, firstly:

"At six years of age, though, what a confusing transformation it must have been. The life that she had known vanished with her fathers; she was exiled from all that was familiar, and abandoned by the family she had always called her own. One can only imagine the child deserted and heartbroken" (loc 552/554, 6%)

and secondly:

"No doubt her hostess led the way, but the story suggests clear thought and steely resolve on Caroline's part rather than nerves or hysterics". (loc 554, 6%)

and thirdly:

"after living with the unknown lady for a time, it's likely that Caroline was sent to a girls' boarding school - once more uprooted and hurled amongst strangers. It's not known which school she might have attended, but there were numerous ladies' academies in Northampton of varying quality; most were expensive." (loc 586, 6%)

There are so many things wrong with this it is difficult to know where to begin.

Firstly, if we accept Pearson's writing here as fact, how does Goldman make the assumption that immediately Chisholm's father dies, she is thrust out from the family "exiled from all that was familiar, and abandoned by the family she had always called her own". Where does Pearson suggest this?

Secondly, in the above terms a minor observation, but in my thesis, (page 39, and my book, page 178) I note that: "the recollection shows the quick wittedness and bravery of the young Caroline." Not a direct quote, but a rewording of my observation.

Thirdly, again accepting Pearson's writing as fact, Goldman makes the leap that Chisholm was sent to a girls' boarding school. There is no factual information whatsoever to substantiate the claim that Chisholm went to a boarding school. I would have been delighted to come across such information in my long hours researching at Northampton Records Office, but no such records came to light. Then we get the phrase: "once more uprooted and hurled amongst strangers." Such strong wording that is based purely on conjecture. Chisholm may possibly have been educated in a Dame School and stayed with an old woman. Interestingly Hoban's interpretation of this incident (without acknowledgement to Pearson) suggests that Caroline was alone in the house with an elderly woman who helped her mother". The inference being that they were actually in the Jones family home (1984, page 9). Alternatively, it could quite easily have been a short visit to an elderly relative for instance. We have no way of knowing.

Dr Carole Walker's Review of Sarah Goldman's Biography

Lastly, another minor observation, in my book, page 13, I write "there were a number of academies in the town, three of which were for ladies." Goldman does not attribute her information. How does she know the academies were expensive? Rosemary Dunhill in her new book, *Northamptonshire National Schools 1812-1854*, suggests the contrary and notes, "though records for the earlier period are sparse, that children were supported by The County Society's funds" (2017, page 17).

In the *Afterword* to my book I have a section on *The Biographer's Dilemma* (page 176). (As an aside, it is interesting that Goldman also has an *Afterword*.) I go to great lengths to show the interpretations that could be deduced from the various incongruities between Chisholm's father's will, the 1851 census returns, Chisholm's baptismal record and Pearson's story of Chisholm "living with an aged lady in Northampton". I make it perfectly clear that we have no way of knowing the correct interpretation of such documentation. Goldman however uses this information to assert that Chisholm was illegitimate and this is the reason Chisholm was sent away from home. This is Goldman's conjecture and not based on factual evidence. What is worrying is that someone who comes to Goldman's book without any prior knowledge of Chisholm will believe Goldman's assertions especially as it is written in normal text and not highlighted as fiction.

Again answering the question of 'Process' in *The Australian Legend*, Goldman acknowledges my research but suggests that a "major difference was that my best research and interest was focused on Caroline's life and work in the UK". This seems to call into question the reasoning behind such research. My own studies were undertaken precisely because this was an area where no serious exploration had been undertaken by previous biographers. It was an area that was sadly lacking in information on Chisholm's background. The results of my researches in the UK have added greatly to our knowledge of Chisholm. A study of Elizabeth Rathbone's diaries, for instance, found at Liverpool University, threw light on Chisholm's school in Australia, and her thankfulness to Rathbone for her hospitality to Chisholm's husband and children whilst she was still based in Australia prior to her return with Archibald junior in 1866. Research of Archibald's service record at the British Library in London led to new knowledge of Archibald's, and hence Caroline's, movements in India. Goldman is not shy in using such information, albeit imaginatively. It is regrettable therefore that Babette Smith's review in *The Weekend Australian* suggests that: "not many details of Caroline's childhood survive but Goldman has ferreted out what remains". Smith obviously comes to Goldman's book, as others will do, without prior knowledge of earlier biographies and take Goldman's work at face value.

Goldman's writing although acknowledging me in certain areas, in others, as can be seen from the above, writes as if it were her own research. Goldman for instance suggests in *The Australian Legend* in reply to the question on 'Process': "elsewhere I found other resources [other than my research] for example the notice of Caroline and Archibald's wedding in the *Northampton Mercury*." A minor observation, but the notice is referred to on page 39 of my thesis, and note 7, Chapter 9, page 154 gives the Notice of Marriage in full. Again from the same answer to 'Process' as above, Goldman states that "elsewhere I found other resources . . . which gave me the whereabouts of various of her [Chisholm's] relations at the time [1831] and afterwards." Page 82, note 10, of my thesis, notes, amongst other things, that Chisholm's "siblings and half-brothers and sisters, all worked in humble trades, i.e. cooper, painter and glazier, draper, and on the railways . . . Chisholm's mother, Sarah Jones, is a 'proprietor of houses' yet living with her at 11 Mayorhold are Thomas Jones, her grandson and his wife,

Dr Carole Walker's Review of Sarah Goldman's Biography

Mary Ann, who work as shoemaker and shoe binder respectively. There were no servants in the house on the night of the 1851 census." Several places within *A Saviour of Living Cargoes* give details of Chisholm and her siblings and family.

In the interview *Spotlight on: Sarah Goldman* with *The NSW Writers Centre* Goldman states: "I drew heavily on eyewitness records of the time and importantly, diaries written by other women of the era". Not a unique idea. As an example I referred to the Memoirs of Harriet Tytler 1828-1858 *An Englishwoman in India; Ladies in the Sun - The Mem-Sahibs' India 1790-1860* and to *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy*, James Dawson Burn, 1978/1855.

A further disturbing assertion is that Goldman claims in the interview with *The Australian Legend* that "she was fortunate to happen upon the log of Archdale Low Whitby, who sailed to Australia in the *Slains Castle*, Caroline's first Family Colonization Loan Society boat". A notation giving full details of the *Log of the Voyage from London to Port Phillip per Barque "Slains Castle"* kept by Mr A. L. Whitby is given in note 13, Chapter 9, page 154 of my thesis and note 36 in *A Saviour of Living Cargoes*, England and Emigration. To imply that this was new information that Goldman had independently found is erroneous.

To my total embarrassment I included in my thesis the first photograph that Goldman shows in her section of photographs at the rear of her book (the carté-de-visite). Goldman attributes this image of the carté-de-visite as an image of Chisholm, probably produced in 1853, without acknowledging me. I vividly remember sitting in the Library at the University of Liverpool to view Elizabeth Rathbones diaries and coming across what I thought, what I wanted to believe, was the first known photograph of Chisholm. A Eureka moment! The carté-de-visite was clearly signed on the back Caroline Chisholm, a similar signature to Chisholm's known signature. There were some niggling doubts, but such was the euphoria that the image was included in my thesis as an image of Caroline Chisholm. When I came to write my biography the niggling doubts were still there and I undertook further investigation. Several avenues of research, including the history of the photographer and discussions with costume historians, categorically confirmed that the carté-de-visite could not be that of Chisholm. Not least the photograph is of a younger woman. A line engraving portrait of Chisholm by J. B. Hunt held at the National Portrait Gallery in London, published in 1853, clearly shows a much older, more rotund looking woman. With such evidence I did not include the image in my biography. Not only has Goldman not acknowledged my research; she has not validated the secondary source. I have no wish to see my error in the thesis perpetuated. In all probability the carté-de-visite is likely to be that of Caroline Chisholm junior when she visited her Uncle, Major John Chisholm, in Cheltenham with her father and brother when they had returned from Australia in 1865 (information I found in Elizabeth Rathbone's diaries).

Disappointingly it has been felt necessary in this review to highlight some of the problems with Goldman's book rather than concentrate on Chisholm and her remarkable achievements. Historical biography has not served Chisholm well. As Goldman herself notes in her Introduction, and I fully detail in my thesis and in the *Afterword* of my book (*The Biographies and their Authors*, page 156), Chisholm's first biographer, Eneas Mackenzie, writing two biographies in quick succession in the mid-nineteenth century, felt the need to write of Chisholm's achievements outside the home and not lift the veil on her private life, in line with the social constrictions of the time: the angel in the house ideology. Mackenzie's confusion in the two biographies with regard to Chisholm's birthplace and family background has been perpetuated throughout later historical biographies until my book in 2009.

Dr Carole Walker's Review of Sarah Goldman's Biography

Chisholm's religion has encouraged other biographers, especially Hoban and Bogle, to skew their writing based on their desire for Chisholm's beatification. In the process they raised Chisholm on a pedestal as a saintly woman, rather than an ordinary woman whose work was extraordinary. In the 1960/70s Australian feminists chastised Chisholm for being anti-feminist in her approach to finding servile jobs for female emigrants, disregarding the contemporary period in which Chisholm worked. When asked by the reporter at *The Australian Legend* what she thought about fictionalizing of real lives, Goldman responded that she thought the "art of biography is to bring a real person alive as a character so that they are interesting not only on an intellectual level, but on an emotional level also." These are admirable sentiments, but they should not be at the expense of misrepresenting substantiated evidence. A reader would be forgiven for thinking that in trying to retrieve some of the hard work that went into the novel that was abandoned for the biography, Goldman has bent some of the biographical detail to fit imaginative ideas she had already incorporated into the novel with an eye on later use in television and cinematography.

A Saviour of Living Cargoes - The Life and Work of Caroline Chisholm is the last biography of Chisholm and therefore I was urged to write a review by those who are very much concerned with the approach that Goldman has taken in her book. I have found it extremely difficult to write such a review. Not least of all because Goldman obviously champions Chisholm and her work. Goldman "wanted to discover ... a sense of the woman herself the flesh and blood creature" as opposed to her view that both Kiddle and I "have ignored both the social and emotional sides of Caroline, leaving a character who, although admirable, is at best two-dimensional" (loc 381, 2%). There is however nothing more poignant than Chisholm's own words that show her vulnerability, her doubts and worries and concerns about her children in the letter that Chisholm wrote to Bishop Ullathorne and given in full in my book, page 114. This is hardly a view of a two-dimensional woman. Such documents do not need dressing up.

I chose to write an objective substantiated biography of Chisholm that would correct many of the perpetuated errors in previous biographies, to strip away the hyperbole that surrounded Chisholm, and show Chisholm as the extraordinary woman she was. For me, Goldman's book has taken a backward step. There are too many instances where Goldman moves imaginatively away from corroborative information in her efforts to establish the social and emotional sides of Chisholm. I am very concerned and deeply saddened that I can only foresee a future where Goldman's imaginative view of "the sense of the woman herself the flesh and blood creature" will be perpetuated as the truth and will lead us away once more from the established facts that show this remarkable and extraordinary woman that was Caroline Chisholm.

Dr Carole Walker is the author of: *A Saviour of Living Cargoes - The Life and Work of Caroline Chisholm*, published in 2009. Her doctoral thesis: *Caroline Chisholm 1808-1877 - Ordinary Woman - Extraordinary Life, Impossible Category*, Loughborough University 2001, has been available online since 2011. She is also the author of *A History and Guide to Collecting Ladies' Antique Skirt Lifters*, with an Introduction by Tim Wonnacott.

Dr Walker's *A Saviour of Living Cargoes - The Life and Work of Caroline Chisholm* and Margaret Kiddle's *Caroline Chisholm* are available from many retail and online booksellers.