

Friends of Caroline Chisholm

NEWSLETTER

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Caroline Chisholm: a Good News Story for the 21st Century Submission to Plenary Council 2020

God is asking the Church in Australia to provide formation for the laity and to recognise the contribution of lay people to the mission of the Church.

A lay saint would be one way of promoting the idea of holiness for laypeople.

In 1976, at the Laity Conference, it was agreed that the Church in Australia should pursue the canonisation of Caroline Chisholm. Almost 50 years later there has been no progress.

It would be a great thing if the Bishops at the Plenary Council were to promote her cause. Unlike the founder of religious congregations, laypeople have no resources, nor a tradition of promoting holy women and men. The Caroline Chisholm Story is a Good News Catholic story independent of the institution.

Popular Acclaim

The people of Australia, individuals and organisations, have recognised her holiness. There are numerous institutions, schools, refuges, and welfare agencies named after Caroline Chisholm. Centrelink headquarters in Canberra is known as the Caroline Chisholm Centre. The offices of the Diocese of Broken Bay are named after her.

There is artwork in Churches celebrating her contribution at Sts Peter & Paul Cathedral, Goulburn, NSW; St Mary's Cathedral crypt, Sydney; St Ignatius, Richmond, Victoria; St Mary's, Hamilton, Victoria. There are plaques in Melbourne and Sydney commemorating her work. A portrait of Mrs Chisholm can also be found at Domus Australia in Rome. And there are facilities for travellers at the site of one of her "shelter sheds" in Diggers Rest, a North-Western suburb of Melbourne.

She was referred to as a saint by her own contemporaries. Compared to Moses "in a bonnet and a shawl". Her work has been written about in poetry, novels and musicals.

She attributes her vocation as received from God.

A Prophet— A Woman Before Her Time

Caroline Chisholm:

- ◇ campaigned for the welfare and employment of young women;
- ◇ was ecumenical before ecumenism existed;
- ◇ implemented Catholic Social teaching decades before Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*;
- ◇ believed in women's suffrage when the colonial governments were still embryonic and the preserve of landowners;
- ◇ invented social work before social workers;
- ◇ supported a just wage before Higgin's Harvester Judgement;
- ◇ supported immigration from Britain, but also the Chinese and the Indians;
- ◇ was the mother of nine; and
- ◇ was married to a man who supported her vocation.

Historian Timothy Suttor referred to Australia having two saints: Archbishop Polding and Mrs Chisholm. Poet James McAuley thought she ought to have been a saint ahead of Mary MacKillop.

A woman for her own time and a woman for our times.

Clara Geoghegan

Clara prepared her submission as a Friend of Caroline Chisholm

Christian Charity of Self-Sacrifice

Samuel Sidney worked for a better organised and more humane system for female emigration, and he and Caroline Chisholm were natural co-operators and allies in that shared goal. His 1852 book, *The Three Colonies of Australia*, a handbook for intending emigrants, had a lengthy chapter on Mrs Chisholm's activities and achievements in the Colony up to 1846, the Voluntary Statements, and her advocacy and personal commitment since then in Great Britain and Ireland.

Prior to that book, he wrote a letter to Sidney Herbert, an influential member of parliament who had, in 1849, established a fund to send poor single females to Australia and then founded the Female Emigration Society. The choice of young females and their occupations were criticized and the fund was almost spent.

Samuel Sidney published the letter in 1850 as *Female Emigration As It Is — As it May Be: A Letter to the Right Honourable Sidney Herbert, M.P.* Here is an extract [pages 38 and 39] describing Caroline Chisholm.

“The distinguishing characteristic of Mrs. Chisholm is philanthropy—extending to all classes and all sects—directed by a degree of common sense that almost amounts to genius, united with an energy, a zeal, an untiring perseverance that renders nothing she undertakes impossible.

Her philanthropy is not a mere amusement to be taken up at odd hours, like a new romance—to be laid down as quickly as it was taken up—to be satisfied by a distribution of cheap tracts, or, at most, of cheap superfluous guineas—by capricious visits to poor cottages, whose misery renders the change from the luxurious drawing-room a pleasing excitement. It is a part of her life—of her daily duty.

For the cause she embraced she has chosen to abandon the luxuries, nay, the comforts, to which her fortune and station entitled her; to wear stuff instead of silk; to work hard, to live hard, to save, that she may spend upon the poor. Her children, from their earliest years, are enlisted in the same good work.

Ten years have been thus consistently spent in promoting that colonisation which others, talking and eloquently writing about, only impede.

We know that Mrs. Chisholm and her noble-minded husband have again and again refused everything in the shape of pecuniary compensation for their sacrifices; and knowing this, we wonder that not one powerful or wealthy statesman has been found to do himself honour by some signal mark of regard for so much wisdom and virtue combined.

A year's hard work at his duty in Ireland earned Sir Charles Trevelyan a knighthood, and a bonus of a few thousands sterling.

Thousands have reason to bless Mrs. Chisholm. We find her not like Mrs. Fry—descending from the drawing-room to the prison, to return, carriage-borne, to that drawing-room, when her errand of mercy was done— but in the small room of a small house, in an obscure suburb, writing at a rickety table, amid piles of colonial documents, answers to her thousand correspondents.

It is a painful truth, that the finest good breeding, the purest fashionable piety do not guard the habitants of this highly-civilized England from an amount of cold-blooded indifference which renders the rude barbarism of the Bush in Australia, with its genuine heartiness, hospitality, and generosity, far preferable. The gorgeous munificence of an overflowing superfluity secures a meed of praise, of adulation, of adoration, while the Christian charity of self-sacrifice passes almost unnoticed.

We weep tears of the genteel joy when a *millionaire* endows a church or founds an hospital, without, for that purpose, sacrificing one mansion, one carriage, one footman, no, not even a lap-dog or nosegay; while a head and heart that might with happiness to the world found and govern a colonial empire, toils and moils over the petty economy of household details in order to save for—

‘MY POOR EMIGRANTS.’”

Mrs Chisholm's Early and Latter-Day Opponents

Before she returned to England in 1846, Caroline Chisholm had only one serious opponent in the Colony. That was John Dunmore Lang, a Presbyterian minister, who asserted she was intent on populating the Colony with Catholic immigrants from Ireland. Lang also left for England in 1846. Over the next few years he agitated for his own emigration schemes and stirred sectarian bias against Mrs Chisholm and the changes and arrangements she advocated. Soon after she arrived back in Australia in 1854, Mrs Chisholm entered the political fray and attracted criticism by publicly advocating for the "open the lands" movement over the ensuing decade. That criticism came from vested interests and was not directly personal. Thomas Holt's sharp reproach, in a NSW House of Assembly debate in 1862, that she had become "weary of well-doing" was personal, and it stung her, though the politician (eventually) apologised.

Lang's sectarian attacks and Holt's reproach are types of detraction, and both were based on untruths. For someone who attempted and achieved so much in almost 30 years of active public life, Caroline Chisholm had relatively and absolutely few detractors. Her contemporaries in a position to make an informed assessment invariably spoke and wrote of her admiringly. In fact, Samuel Sidney's description of her philanthropy comes close to adulation — see the *Christian Charity of Self-Sacrifice* article. So too does Robert Lowe's 1845 judgement:

"One person only in the colony has done anything effectual — anything on a scale which may be called large — to mitigate this crying evil and national sin, and to fix *families* on our land in lieu of bachelors. And, strange to say, that one is an humble, unpretending, quiet-working *female* missionary! an *immigrant* missionary — not a clerical one! The singularity of her mission, looking to the nature of her work, is one of the most original that was ever devised or undertaken by either man or woman; and the object, the labour, the design, are all beyond praise." [This is taken from Samuel Sidney's *Female Emigration As It Is — As it May Be* letter, page 37; for fuller details, refer to the article opposite.]

What Lowe saw as "beyond praise" was Mrs Chisholm's plan and action to "mitigate this crying evil and national sin, and to fix *families* on our land in lieu of bachelors". The foundational "evil" was that men far exceeded the number of women in the Colony, leading to the so-called bachelor stations, where commonly there was, inter alia, situational homosexuality and/or sexual subjection of indigenous women.

Once in England, Caroline Chisholm discreetly raised these issues in her letter of 4 February, 1847 to Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies. She expressed her concern that to the sex disparity "may be traced in a great degree the gradual and certain extermination of those unfortunate tribes, the Aborigines of New Holland; They [sic], the original holders of the soil, demand the speedy and parental interference of a humane government". [Copy accessed in Manuscripts CY Reel 2097, Mitchell Library, "Misc. Papers re Caroline Chisholm".]

Her concern is not confirmed by Associate Professor Anne O'Brien, who implies in *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism* that Mrs Chisholm had no interest in protecting indigenous women [see Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, page 59]. O'Brien also maintains that "privately she seems to have been just as dismissive of efforts to reclaim female convicts as other women of her background" [page 43], but cites no evidence. O'Brien is simply wrong when she contends that Mrs Chisholm "confined her work to immigrant rather than convict women" [page 44].

When examined on 20 April, 1847 by a House of Lords committee dealing with "On the Execution of the Criminal Law", she answered "Yes" to the question: "Did you find employment for female convicts . . . ?". To the ensuing question, "For what proportion . . . ?", she replied: "The females are generally provided for from the [Female] Factory in the first instance, but after that, if they conduct themselves well, they generally get situations in the country." To the next question: ". . . For any considerable number . . . ?", she answered, "No". [House of Lords Sessional Papers, Volume VII, para. 3810 to 3812]. She went on to give "about 1,000" as the number of male and female Tickets of Leave holders she had assisted [para. 3854]. That excluded those who had been given

Mrs Chisholm's Early and Latter-Day Opponents

their freedom. She could not provide a figure for them because, she said, "it was a rule with me to avoid as far as I could in the Colony asking any questions regarding them [that is, their past status as convicts]" [para. 3817].

Surprisingly, O'Brien makes basic errors. The Family Colonisation Loan Society was not founded in 1846 [page 46] but in late-1849 [see Hoban's and Kiddle's biographies, pages 233 and 129 (2nd edition) respectively]. Mrs Chisholm's 1842 book was written not "to raise funds" for the Bent Street Home [page 44], but, as the book's Preface makes clear, to achieve improvements for young female emigrants upon arrival and until they were settled; besides, it was published shortly before the home closed. O'Brien observes that for Mrs Chisholm and Rev. Lang "colonisation was the answer to Britain's grinding poverty" [page 37]; however, much to his chagrin, her charity extended to the even greater need in Ireland, then part of the United Kingdom, not Britain.

Various attempts to undercut Caroline Chisholm's historical standing are deliberately provocative. O'Brien claims that Mrs Chisholm's "reckoning" of female immigration in the early 1840s was "a little more complex than the Madonna/Whore dichotomy she has been seen as finessing" [page 44]. Seen by whom? Poorly informed undergraduates? The "reckoning", as related in Mrs Chisholm's book, O'Brien proposes, was "a little more complex" because it had "three categories, not two", the "do-nothings" being the addition [pages 44 and 45]. Two of Mrs Chisholm's categories obviously deal with the employability of the majority of emigrants prepared to work — one being "country servants" and the other "light handy girls (suitable for indoor work) — and the third with those who preferred idleness to any work or the work on offer. O'Brien tries to fit these to the alleged dichotomy, through quoting Mrs Chisholm's asides on the incidence (if any) of loss of character of young women in the three categories. The evidence is plain; Mrs Chisholm has delivered on the promise in her book: "I will state nothing but facts" [see page 28 of my *Unfeigned Love*].

O'Brien goes beyond the evidence of Mrs Chisholm's "Our Home Life" lecture on 13 June, 1861, as reported in three Sydney newspapers and reproduced in John Moran's *Radical in a Bonnet and Shawl*, which she gives as her source. O'Brien asserts, "And when roused on the public platform in lectures advocating land reform, she relished enough inverted snobbery to hurl insults at those who lived in 'childless mansions'" [page 47]. I could see no reference in the newspaper reports to the term 'childless mansions'. One mansion of "a distinguished bachelor" (who was named) was mentioned, as was "the Australian Club", both as not being real homes. There is no solid evidence in the close-to-verbatim newspaper reports for "relished enough inverted snobbery to hurl insults".

Charles Dickens' "I dream of Mrs. Chisholm, and her housekeeping. The dirty faces of her children are my continual companions." O'Brien renders as "The dirty faces of her children gave Charles Dickens bad dreams" [page 47]. Why not amusing or distracting dreams? O'Brien again goes beyond the evidence, but she lets Dickens' wisecrack pass, with no comment about snobbery, insult or self-indulgent criticism of a hard-working mother of six children (one a month old and another two under five years of age).

O'Brien refers to Caroline Chisholm as "*probably* Australia's best-known 19th-century philanthropist" [page 48, italics added], but does not identify anyone who is equally or better known. This unwarranted meanness is in keeping with O'Brien's inadequate and misleading portrayal of Caroline Chisholm in *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*. Mrs Chisholm is mainly dealt with in "The Democratic Moment", the second of seven chapters in O'Brien's book, which are chronological. Self-help appears in the last two chapters, leaving Mrs Chisholm's innovative role in that sphere untreated. Also relevant there but untreated is the co-operative farming endeavour she set up at Shellharbour in 1843.

Rodney Stinson

Mary Hoban, *Fifty-one Pieces of Wedding Cake*, Lowden Publishing Co, 1973; Margaret Kiddle, *Caroline Chisholm*, MUP, 2nd edition, 1957.