

Friends of Caroline Chisholm

NEWSLETTER

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The young and old, people of all times and cultures, warm to good stories that are well told. Caroline Chisholm seemed to know this, as story-telling in the form of anecdotes filled her 1842 book and appeared frequently in her subsequent speeches and letters advocating emigration and related reforms. Her life and work, in turn, continue to generate interest and admiration, from one generation to the next.

In this issue new creative story-telling about Caroline Chisholm is considered in two articles, and a third weighs historical assessments about her, one explicit and the other implicit.

The lead article brings to notice Margaret Fitzgerald's new play, *Mrs Chisholm and the Female Home*, the playwright's explanation of the background to the play's development, and the high estimation she has of the magnitude of Caroline Chisholm's public commitments and the personal costs these brought.

New Play About Caroline Chisholm

Mrs Chisholm and the Female Home, a new play written by Margaret Fitzgerald, was to be publicly performed for the first time in Sydney's Chippen St Theatre in mid-July, 2021. The NSW Government's Covid lockdown stymied that. Details about the dates and location of the rescheduled performances will be available on www.peachproductionspresents.com.

The play, focusing on the crucial year of 1841 and running for 75 minutes, opens with Mrs Chisholm's encounter with Mr Merewether in the immigration barracks regarding the deficient arrangements for newly arrived immigrants, and ends with the trial of the captain and surgeon of the *Carthaginian*, an emigrant ship, for their maltreatment of Margaret Ann Bolton during its voyage to the Colony.

Between these two scenes are other scenes portraying Mrs Chisholm's motivation, her efforts to establish a home for female immigrants, and its progress once underway. The playwright

Information about a major publisher's recent commissioning of a new biography of Caroline Chisholm and circumspect facts about the commissioned author are also in this issue, along with a rumination of just how many biographies have been written.

The *Contrasts in Past Historical Assessments of Caroline Chisholm* article presents two histories written within a few years of Mrs Chisholm's death in 1877. Australia's first national history—David Blair's *The History of Australasia*—recognized her importance, praising her social reforms and according her many more words than any clergyman. Archbishop Polding was not mentioned at all. As to be expected, the Archbishop featured prominently in Dean Kenny's history, but Mrs Chisholm's name and significance were completely ignored. Dean Kenny's implicit assessment was that she had made no valuable contribution to the Catholic Church in Australia.

uses some dramatic licence in the staging of these scenes, so as to give theatrical coherence and to convey more effectively the enormity of Mrs Chisholm's scheme to assist poor immigrants and the personal cost it entailed for her.

Margaret Fitzgerald understands Australia's history to be “the story of migration, from the earliest arrivals thousands of years ago”, in which “[an] unique achievement . . . is the work of Caroline Chisholm” [playwright's explanatory notes on *Mrs Chisholm and the Female Home*].

Within the story of peoples and communities are many stories. “Caroline Chisholm's is the story of determination and purpose, and the very personal story of a woman who is prepared to sacrifice everyday comfort and family to achieve redress of injustices and brutality around her. She saw the larger scale of the wasted lives and opportunity, and also the individual suffering of people who could not help themselves”, Margaret Fitzgerald explains.

New Play About Caroline Chisholm

The playwright continues, “My interest in the story is to advance recognition of an amazing woman in our past, and of the part women played, from the earliest days of European settlement, in building our community. . . My play is an attempt to bring the story of Caroline Chisholm to a new audience.”

The play “shows Mrs Chisholm beginning her campaign over two years in Sydney; there is still more of her story to be told, as she continued to work for immigrants for another twenty years.”

Margaret Fitzgerald is also the play’s director, and co-director is Hope Disher, who is one of eleven actors in the cast. The pivotal role of Mrs Chisholm is held by Rachele Edson, the Sydney-based stage, film and television actor.

Mrs Chisholm and the Female Home is one of five new short plays telling the stories of women and their journey to identity and independence, and given the season name of *Women’s Voices: Stories to Stage*. The media release states the season is “the creation of Peach Productions and its artistic director Margaret Fitzgerald” and that the company’s play development involved “collaborative writing and participation

in group/peer meetings—including dramaturgical input” and “an introduction to production aspects, as well as promotion, media and audience building”.

The media release quotes Margaret Fitzgerald’s summing-up that the *Women’s Voices: Stories to Stage* season is “about women facing challenges and making positive changes in their lives and the lives of those around them. It’s about the empowerment of women, in personal and public life”.

A week in November at the Chippen Street Theatre has now been booked for the rescheduled performances of *Mrs Chisholm and the Female Home*. Specific dates and performance details for this and the other new plays in the *Women’s Voices: Stories to Stage* season will be uploaded to the company’s website:

www.peachproductionspresents.com

Tickets cost \$28 or \$22 for senior/student/disability concession holders.

Other arrangements will be the same or similar, Covid restrictions permitting. The venue is accessible, and the play is suitable for young people aged 15 and over.

Planned New Biography of Caroline Chisholm

A major publisher has just commissioned a highly-regarded Australian writer to write a biography of Caroline Chisholm. Because of commercial-in-confidence reasons, identifying details cannot be given at this time.

The writer, who is a long-time admirer of Mrs Chisholm, is possibly best known for popular children’s books, but there are many readers of the writer’s books of historical fiction and books on historical topics for adults. The writer told the Newsletter’s editorial team the biography would provide a different interpretation of Mrs Chisholm’s life and its significant from previous biographies.

There have been four biographies of the subject, five if Sarah Goldman’s pastiche publication is included, and six if Margaret Swann’s 1925 booklet is included. Margaret Kiddle’s 1950 biography was based on her M.A. thesis, and in

her introduction she acknowledges the work and help of others, including Margaret Swann, who wrote a great deal on local and regional history and had her 72-page booklet on Mrs Chisholm published by the Government Printer in Sydney and “issued by authority of the Premier of New South Wales”. This support ensured copies were freely distributed to schools in the State (and perhaps nationally).

Margaret Swann’s booklet was well researched, and her fluent style delivered an agreeable balance of narrative and analytical history. It concentrated on the 1841 to 1845 period, especially enhanced reception and settlement of immigrants, and included many extracts from Mrs Chisholm’s book about the Female Immigrants’ Home. For the later years, she made effective use of contemporary British and Australian newspapers.

Contrasts in Past Historical Assessments of Caroline Chisholm

David Blair's *The History of Australasia*, published in 1878, was magisterial in length and weight, having over 700 quarto pages, large type, thick paper and full morocco leather binding. The author's stated aim was similarly magisterial: to produce "a complete Australian library within the covers of a single volume" [page iv], beginning with the early European voyages—deemed discoveries of the Southern ocean and the Great South Land—and finishing with the emergence of self-government in New South Wales and other Australasian Colonies around mid-century. There were chapters on each of the colonies, governors and thematic topics (exploration and so on). It was Australia's first national history.

In keeping with history writing of the time, Blair gave most attention to institutional and constitutional developments and to the varied roles of Great Men but with a major innovation. One Great Woman received her rightful due, and that woman was Caroline Chisholm. Of the 552 pages dealing with Australia alone, Blair gave her life and work about 2,400 words on pages 355 to 359. His praise was unstinting, drawing extensively on Samuel Sidney's 1852 book, *The Three Colonies of Australia*.

No other woman was given such prominence, nor was the same attention (favourable or not) conferred on any clergyman. Father Jeremiah O'Flynn received fewer than 70 words, most repeating his (incorrect) claim to have Colonial Office approval to act as a priest in the Colony after his arrival in 1817 [page 317]. My perusal of Blair's book did not find another Catholic clergyman named, not even Archbishop Polding. Yet a petty dispute about precedence of clergy in the funeral procession of Tasmania's Governor Wilmot in 1847 was described, including how the Catholic priests had "shot ahead" to ensure they got in front of the Anglican dignitaries [page 549].

Richard Johnson, Henry Fulton and Samuel Marsden, Anglican clergymen in New South Wales early years, as well as John Dunmore Lang, the firebrand Presbyterian minister, have more than passing mention, and a handful of other Protestant ministers have brief details.

There are a couple of even-handed summaries of the number of churches built, estimated adherents, and changes in government financial support of clergy and religion generally. The book's supplementary chapter, which seems like an afterthought, has some minor details on religious topics among its disparate inclusions.

Blair presents, on the whole, balanced views of religious denominations and clergymen, despite their often fractious relations and his own Presbyterianism. Born in Ireland in 1820, Blair was one of the trainee clergymen recruited for New South Wales in 1849 by John Dunmore Lang. He was ordained in Sydney in 1850, but did not persevere, pursuing journalism, politics and reformist causes in various measures for the remainder of his life and also writing three historical works. These details are based on his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry, whose writer, the late Jill Roe, observed: "Privately Blair saw himself not only as an intellectual but as a Christian".

Blair had responded to Lang's advertisement for trainee clergy in the *British Banner*, the newspaper in which Lang promoted his own immigration scheme and attacked Mrs Chisholm's. Thus Blair would probably have read Lang's depiction of her as "an artful female Jesuit, the able but concealed agent of the Romish priesthood in Australia" [part of Lang's letter to Earl Grey printed in the *British Banner*, 21 November, 1849, quoted in Mary Hoban's *Fifty-One Pieces of Wedding Cake*, page 226].

What Blair thought of this detraction then is unknown, but he could not have missed the earlier laudatory newspaper coverage of Mrs Chisholm's London-based work for safe ships, support for family immigration and related activities from 1846 onwards. Moreover, Blair was living in Melbourne when Mrs Chisholm and her family were reunited there in 1854, and he would certainly have known of her advocacy work for improved immigrant reception and shelter sheds for travellers going to the goldfields and job openings in the country. While he was far more radical and an elected politician, he and Mrs Chisholm had some social reforms in common and both had antipathy towards the demands of rapacious squatters.

Contrasts in Past Historical Assessments of Caroline Chisholm

In the preface to *The History of Australasia*, Blair stated that he “made free use of all of the works hitherto published relating to the Southern Colonies”, that extracts from those works “have been carefully condensed, verified and sometimes almost rewritten”, and that “it was not deemed necessary to give specific acknowledgement, or to cumber the pages with footnotes” [page iv]. However, specific acknowledgement was made now and then, one being the 250 word extract from John Dunmore Lang’s *Historical and Statistical Account of New South Wales* [page 285].

Although Blair relied on Samuel Sidney’s *The Three Colonies of Australia*, his assessment of Caroline Chisholm carried his own stamp. For instance, referring to her 1842 book, he wrote: “This plain speaking and unusual style of colonial publication—hard truths without acidity—did its work. A considerable reform was introduced” [page 358]. His final tribute was to include Robert Lowe’s 1846 poem which begins “The guardian angel of her helpless sex, whom no fatigue could daunt, no crosses vex” [page 359], but omitting the poet’s name.

The reviews of *The History of Australasia* were mixed, including those in *The Argus* and *The Age* which criticised the author’s lack of attribution for verbatim and heavily cribbed extracts from the named and other sources.

Unsurprisingly, the Catholic newspapers, welcomed *A History of the Commencement and Progress of Catholicity in Australia, up to the year 1840*, published in mid-1886 and written by the Very Rev Dean Kenny, Having just under 250 pages, it dealt mainly with New South Wales. A second volume looking at other colonies was in draft; unfortunately, Dean Kenny died in late-1886, and that volume was never completed.

Dean Kenny’s was the first book dedicated solely to the Catholic Church’s history in Australia, but other compilations about the opening decades had already been published. A half-century before, Dr William Ullathorne, Polding’s Vicar General, included quite detailed historical accounts in *The Catholic Mission in Australasia* and *A reply to Judge Burton*. From the 1840s onwards the

Colony’s Catholic newspapers had historical articles of varying length, often associated with a significant anniversary. In these, as with Dean Kenny’s book, the identity and undertakings of the clergy and the Church’s organizational interests and endeavours (including the arrival and work of the Sisters of Charity) were almost always the chief focus. There were major exceptions.

One was when the laity—convicts, soldiers, emancipists, and free settlers—were without priests and the sacraments, which was the case for all but a handful of years before the arrival in 1820 of Fathers Therry and Conolly. Most nonetheless retained their Catholic allegiance [chapters III and IV].

A second exception in Dean Kenny’s book was his 21-page Appendix addressing the grim situation of the Australian Aborigines. He was sympathetic and saw great injustice: “It is now nearly a hundred years since the white man invaded these lands and took from the black man the country . . . ‘the Lord God gave unto him’” [page 230].

A third exception was his recognition of the significance of Roger Therry and John Hubert Plunkett [chapters V, VI, and IX]. Of course, the two Catholic laymen held high public office.

The name and significance of Caroline Chisholm are not to be found in Dean Kenny’s book, not even in his discussion about problems in the bounty emigration scheme or the suitability of Irish emigrants and the changes and debate that had ensued [pages 212 and 213]. It could be argued that her substantial work in the Colony began after 1840 and was outside the book’s purview, but the necessary improvements were achieved due to her pioneering activities of the early 1840s. What’s more, space was made for Plunkett’s 1841 departure overseas on a leave of absence [page 207] and the Sisters of Charity’s founding a Magdalen in 1848 and handing it on to the then Sisters of the Good Shepherd in 1856 [page 163].

The first national history gave Mrs Chisholm her rightful due; Dean Kenny’s constricted book simply ignored her.

Rodney Stinson