

Book Review

Idling in Green Places: A Life of Alec Chisholm

RUSSELL MCGREGOR, 2019

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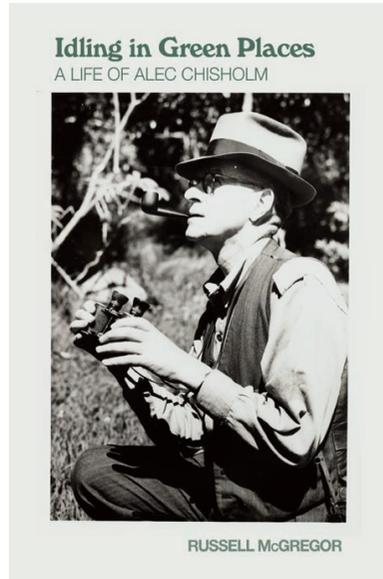
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Black and white photographs

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This perceptive account of the life of Alexander Hugh (Alec) Chisholm, while told in an accessible and conversational style, is nevertheless a scholarly and well-researched piece of Australian history. The author is an Adjunct Professor of History at James Cook University and his grasp of history and especially environmental and ornithological history underpins the different phases of Chisholm's life.

The biography is arranged chronologically and the first two chapters cover Alec's antecedents and his boyhood. His story begins in Maryborough in 1878, with the marriage of Scottish immigrants, Colin Chisholm and Charlotte Kennedy, against a backdrop of families lured to central Victoria by gold. Colin was moderately prosperous as a storekeeper before the financial crash of the 1890s, followed by the drought of 1895-1902. Alec was born in 1890 and helped out in his father's fruit orchard before and after school. Ironically for the life-long naturalist and bird-lover, Alec's job was to protect the fruit from the local birds with the aid of an ancient muzzle-loading gun. The author interrogates Chisholm's early life in search of his life-long passions and finds clues, such as Alec's switch at age thirteen from robbing nests of eggs to simply searching for them. At school, which began at age 4½ and lasted only seven years, Alec excelled at geography and spelling and began a life-long love affair with literature through the writings of Wordsworth, Kipling



and Thoreau. A huge omission was the study of nature, which he soon remedied, and by the time he was eighteen he was back at school as a self-taught visiting lecturer.

Alec's first real job before his fourteenth birthday was with a coach-painter, where he lasted for five years. But his interest and proficiency in the natural world blossomed – he began to keep a nature diary and he joined the Australasian Ornithologists' Union, publishing an article in 1908 on bird conservation. He was also broadening his literary horizons by reading prolifically and writing newspaper articles. A position with the *Maryborough and Dunolly Advertiser* at age twenty-one began a long career as a journalist, all articles tapped out on his trusty portable Corona typewriter, in use for sixty years. Along with his love for natural history and literature, Alec developed an interest in Australian history and politics and began photographing birds and nests. Already the

twisted skeins of this gifted polymath's tapestry were evident.

Chapters 3 and 4 follow Chisholm's move to Brisbane as a journalist and henceforth the country lad lived in big cities. It was in Brisbane that Alec gained a profile on the national stage, through his affiliation with the Gould League of Bird Lovers, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU), the Queensland Naturalists Club, the Australian Journalists' Association and, in 1922, the publication of his first book, *Mateship with Birds*, an 'exuberant, lushly-written tribute to Australian birdlife.' Like other nature writers of the day, Alec linked the appreciation of nature with the strengthening of nationhood and pleaded for more pleasing vernacular names for Australia's birds. *Mateship with Birds*, with its plea for conservation, was well received by reviewers and the public.

The chronological biography is interrupted occasionally by chapters like the one on the Paradise Parrot. Alec was obsessed by this species, considered to be extinct now for nearly a century, and he was one of the last people to see it. McGregor follows the story of the parrot and subsequent publications, particularly Penny Olsen's rather scathing assessment of Chisholm's role, which he considers unjust.

Chapters 7 and 8 cover Chisholm's Sydney years, beginning with the move to Sydney in 1922 to join the *Daily Telegraph*, where he began a weekly nature column as well as contributing articles on conservation, education of the public and the provision of sanctuaries. He also wrote a regular feature on nature for *The Boys Weekly*, where his somewhat illogical views on wildlife were exposed. For example he saw nothing wrong in the blood sport of rabbiting, and his pleas for conservation of birds and mammals did not extend to reptiles. He clashed with some ornithologists in the RAOU where a bitter debate on collecting skin and egg specimens raged for several decades. In 1925 when Chisholm was editor of the *Emu* he published Edwin Ashby's

Presidential Address verbatim, as was the custom, but added an Editor's note rebutting Ashby's arguments for private collections and stating that his views did not align with those of the RAOU. Following the infamous incident at the Marlo RAOU campout in 1935, Alec was appointed Chair of a Committee to Consider Collecting, and its compromise report reflected the diverse views of the members.

From the late 1920s and with the publication of successful and popular books, like *Birds and Green Places* (1929), *Nature Fantasy in Australia* (1932) and *Bird Wonders of Australia* (1934), Alec became well known as a writer who combined scientific precision with poetic language. However, these books further highlighted his unscientific views regarding reptiles and also his dislike for certain birds, like cuckoos, whose nest-parasitism he could not condone. Alec was made a Fellow of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales in 1934 and, after a move to Melbourne in 1932, was promoted in 1936 to editorship of the *Australasian* and a year later of the *Argus*.

An overseas trip to Britain and Germany in 1938 with his wife Olive gave Alec an opportunity for some lecturing and birding but also led to one of the most spectacular discoveries in Australian historical ornithology. His search for material on John and Elizabeth Gould struck gold with the discovery of the hand-written diary of John Gilbert covering Leichardt's expedition of 1844-45 and ending with Gilbert's death on Cape York Peninsula. This discovery led Chisholm to a new career as an historian, beginning with an *Emu* article on the Gilbert diary, a publication on Elizabeth Gould and *Strange New World* (1941). In a chapter devoted to the Leichardt/Gilbert story, McGregor is critical of Chisholm's naïve championship of Gilbert at the expense of Leichardt. This view has been questioned in the 60 years since its publication but a definitive assessment of the character and abilities of the two men is still wanting.

Three chapters cover a major career shift in 1946 when Chisholm took on the editorship of *Who's Who in Australia*, producing just one issue, that for 1947, before he moved on to editing the new *Australian Encyclopaedia*, necessitating a move back to Sydney. In the end the *Encyclopaedia* took ten years to complete and comprised ten volumes, coinciding with Alec's increased irascibility and ill health. However, Alec continued to make time for birding and wrote *News from Nature* (1948) and *The Romance of the Lyrebird* (1960), as well as numerous articles and papers. It is in these later publications that McGregor discerns the increasing divide between Alec's views, which veered towards anthropomorphism, and those of scientific ornithologists, amidst a backdrop of changes in the conservation movement that saw Alec's humanistic and nationalistic stance looking anachronistic.

Chapter 18 follows yet another of Chisholm's career twists. From the mid-1950s he increasingly turned his talents again to Australian history, culminating in the presidency of the Royal Australian Historical Society, and the writing and editing of many historical works. Alec was awarded his highest accolade in 1958, an OBE 'in recognition of his contribution to Australian literature.'

McGregor introduces a chapter here on Alec's relationship with other birders and the RAOU, which in the 1960s was wracked by in-fighting and squabbling. Chisholm had long had issues with editors of *Emu*, but this escalated from the mid-1960s on, symptomatic of the battle between those who wanted the journal to be a well-regarded scientific publication and those who wanted it to appeal more broadly. Chisholm and his ilk were vexed that some of their manuscripts were rejected by *Emu* and other scientific journals.

Gloom hovers over the last three short chapters, Olive's death in November 1970 leaving Alec increasingly isolated and intensifying his

irascibility and his tendency to magnify his own role in past conservation victories. His disorganisation in the domestic sphere began to spill into his professional life and he had difficulty in organising his voluminous papers for their move to the Mitchell Library. Despite increasing frailty he managed several birding trips and did move 33 boxes of papers to the Library early in 1977. He died in his Cremorne flat in July of that year.

Two groups of black-and-white photos complement the Chisholm story, highlighting important events in his life as well as close family and friends. As one would expect from a professional, the indexing and referencing are proficient. The author was fortunate in having a wealth of information to produce this biography and he shows an in-depth knowledge of Chisholm's published and unpublished material, including his diaries and letters. There is evidence of considerable research into the background of Alec's family and into the ornithological backdrop of Chisholm's career as a birder. McGregor also shows a deep knowledge of the conservation movement over sixty years. The book is worthy of its short-listing for the National Biography Award.

McGregor has given us a 'warts and all' biography of Alec Chisholm. He praises Alec for his brilliance as a writer, naturalist, conservationist, historian and encyclopaedist, while recognising his faults of egoism, pedantry and peevishness. Above all he shows how this self-taught boy from the bush became a household name in Australia for fifty years, through his ability to document and to convey his passion for the natural world to his readers. The eminently readable biography will be of interest to historians, ornithologists and conservationists.

Penny Paton