

Ruth A. Morgan review of Russell McGregor, *Idling in Green Places: A Life of Alec Chisholm*

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Amid the grave reports of devastation from areas of Australia ravaged by bushfires over the summer came a glimmer of hope in late January 2020. Some 20 lyrebirds were photographed taking refuge around a dam on a property near Wollombi, New South Wales, on the edge of the Yengo National Park. By this time, almost all the park had been burned by fires that had raged for over a month, and BirdLife Australia estimated that more than half of the known habitat of the lyrebird had been burnt. Soon after, scientists estimated that at least a billion animals had perished in the bushfires of the ‘Savage Summer’. The lyrebirds photographed at Wollombi were among the survivors.

The ‘Great Bird Man’ himself, Alec Chisholm, would not have been surprised by their tenacity. In his 1957 article ‘Romance of the Lyrebird’, he cheerfully concluded, ‘it is likely to persist along the years, charming one generation after another with its brilliant voice and beautiful display’ (p. 30). The lyrebird was not only a species of great interest to the ornithologist and historian, the subject of numerous works, but moreover, Chisholm remained adamant throughout his life that ‘no species of mainland Australian bird was known definitely to have become extinct since the advent of European colonisation’ (p. 67). He was stubborn on this point, for he maintained a positive outlook on species survival as a strategic means to encourage a nationalistic spirit of conservation.

Chisholm’s lifelong commitment to birdwatching and to his project of fostering nationalism through nature is the subject of Russell McGregor’s *Idling in Green Places*. Drawing on Chisholm’s papers at the Mitchell Library, as well as collections in the National Library of Australia and the University of Sydney Library, McGregor has crafted the first full biography of the ‘nationalist naturalist’, journalist and historian from his birth in Maryborough, Victoria, in 1890 to his death at Cremorne Point, New South Wales, in 1977. A fastidious correspondent, Chisholm’s life story offers detailed insights into his journey from self-educated bird enthusiast to newspaper editor; the changing nature of natural history and ornithology; and the wider social, environmental and political transformation of Australia from nationhood to the aftermath of the Dismissal.

With Chisholm having cast aside the more personal of his papers in his final years, McGregor is left to speculate as to the nature of his marriage, fatherhood and domestic life more generally. His marriage to Olive Haseler appears to have been companionable, while his relationship with daughter Deirdre seems to have only improved late in his life. Rather it is his correspondence with the likes of fellow birder Keith Hindwood, the poet Mary Gilmore and English friend Grace Edelsten that provide a clearer picture of Chisholm's inner world and reveal an 'increasing irascibility' (p. 5) arising from poor health and an enduring insecurity.

His letters reveal a tendency for vanity, a proclivity for pedantry and, what McGregor describes as, 'a propensity to put himself at the centre of events' (p. 103). In Chisholm's defence, his journalism career ensured he was remarkably well-connected: on his 1907 Corona typewriter, he corresponded with the likes of Norman Lindsay, Zora Cross, Ion Idriess and E. J. Brady, among others. He dined with Prime Minister Robert Menzies and former prime minister Billy Hughes; briefly served as the press liaison officer to the governor-general, the Duke of Gloucester; and enjoyed the patronage of Sir Keith Murdoch and George Ferguson of Angus & Robertson. Mixing with such 'men in high places', as McGregor puts it, 'boosted his own prestige' (p. 73).

His real mates, it seems, were birds. Disillusioned with formal education, young Chisholm found wonder in nature, apparently 'under the influence of the birds themselves and a spiritual heritage from the Scottish highlands', as he recalled creatively in his 1969 memoir (p. 13). He kept a nature diary and, inspired by nature writers such as Donald Macdonald and Charles Barrett, began to contribute to the *Emu*, the quarterly journal of the (Royal) Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU), which he had joined aged 17. He later became the journal's editor (1926–28) and RAOU president (1939–40), while also serving as an active member of the Queensland Gould League of Bird Lovers, the Queensland Naturalists' Club, the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales, the Victorian Bird Observers' Club, and the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria. 'Idling in green places' may have been more wishful thinking than reality for Chisholm.

In his nature writing, Chisholm sought to enchant his audiences, young and old, with his chatty and informal tone. His style was emotional and passionate, not cerebral, and he railed against the scientific tone of the environmental literature that emerged during the 1960s. For all Chisholm's fairy imagery, the likes of which delighted readers of his *Bird Wonders of Australia* (1934), he was not, what McGregor describes as, 'anti-science'. Rather, Chisholm 'deplored what he saw as scientist's failure to complement analysis with imagination' (p. 107).

Encouraging an appreciative attitude towards nature among his readers would not only foster nature conservation, but also their sense of nationhood. In his first book, *Mateship with Birds* (1922), for instance, Chisholm called for more appealing bird

names, believing that ‘euphonious bird names and lyrical nature poetry belonged together as vehicles through which Australians would come to love the land in which they lived’ (p. 56). He used anthropomorphism to this end too, understanding that drawing out the human-like qualities of bird behaviour could elicit empathy in his readers and draw them closer to nature. In the avian world, joy, intelligence and artistry were the makings of a mate, and mateship with birds was necessary, Chisholm argued, ‘if we as a nation are to develop any real measure of alliance with our native earth’ (pp. 147–48).

Although his ‘lavish’ style appealed to an avid readership, some of his friends were not convinced. Zoologist A. J. ‘Jock’ Marshall, for instance, derided such ‘anthropomorphic nonsense’ and told him so (pp. 178–79). Still, as a ‘moulder of public opinion’ (p. 51), Chisholm had significant clout that he applied to all manner of endeavours, such as lobbying for more stringent fauna protection laws in Queensland in the early 1920s, the reservation of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, an end to private collecting of specimens, and conservation in urban areas. He was especially critical of the use of pesticides and their impact on birdlife, prompted by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962).

Chisholm’s trip to Britain and Europe on the eve of World War II marked the beginning of his turn to biography and historical research. Travelling in an official capacity to promote Australia as a tourist destination, he used the opportunity to seek out large collections of Gouldiana and the diary of naturalist John Gilbert that would later form the basis of *Strange New World* (1941) and *The Story of Elizabeth Gould* (1944). In these works, particularly the former, Chisholm was transforming himself into an expert on early Australian ornithology, and he departed from the lyrical style that had characterised his nature writing. In this new ‘harsh and sometimes petulant’ tone (p. 129), Chisholm celebrated Gilbert in the great man tradition of history writing, and demolished the more well-known Ludwig Leichhardt, who had led the ill-fated expedition to Port Essington in 1844. Chisholm would continue to jealously guard Gilbert’s diary and reputation, with a second issue in 1955 and a new edition published in 1973 as *Strange Journey*.

With a biography of his mate, the poet C. J. Dennis, under his belt (*The Making of a Sentimental Bloke*, 1947) as well as an edition of *Who’s Who in Australia* (1947), Chisholm embarked on his most ambitious project—as editor-in-chief of the new 10-volume *Australian Encyclopedia* (1958). Longer and more difficult than Chisholm or his publishers Angus & Robertson ever expected, the collection was to be ‘an encyclopedia for a nation’, accessible and Australian in both ‘spirit and style’ (p. 154). The largest single entry at 80,000 words was headed ‘Aborigines’, in addition to biographical entries for notable Aboriginal people, reflecting the growing public interest in Aboriginal affairs. Although the process earned him an OBE on

publication, Chisholm's correspondence suggests the honour was hard won, with his troubles ranging from finding a home in Sydney to that familiar editorial problem of 'contributoritis' (p. 161).

During his editorship of the *Encyclopedia*, Chisholm had become a member of the Royal Australian Historical Society, then the most prestigious body for the study of history in Australia. Elected to its council in 1954, he served as vice president (1956–58) and president (1959–60), and sat almost continuously until his death in 1977. A keen biographer, Chisholm's *Encyclopedia* had included over 2,000 biographical entries and he was a major contributor to the early volumes of the recently established *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Among his 18 entries were familiar faces: Elizabeth and John Gould, and John Gilbert, as well as Louisa Atkinson and 'wild white man' John Wilson.

In his 1969 memoir *The Joy of the Earth* Chisholm turned to his final subject. By this time, Chisholm was 'beginning to feel a man out of his time' (p. 201) as he observed changes in the direction of the conservation movement of which he had once been at the centre. He was, after all, a 'conservative conservationist' (p. 238) who did not oppose development, but simply the 'needless desecration of nature' (p. 182). McGregor suspects the social and political changes of 1960s and 1970s Australia only intensified his egoism, and Chisholm became increasingly embittered as his health deteriorated. His recollections of his youth, however, brought fresh praise from readers and buoyed him to attempt a second volume, the unfinished *Spice of Life*.

Although Chisholm felt the heavy hand of Father Time in the last decade of his life, his message of hope and of making kin with other species continues to enchant readers, with Scribe reissuing *Mateship with Birds* in 2013. Thoughtful, sensitive and nuanced, *Idling in Green Places* is an elegant work of environmental history that will be a valuable companion to Libby Robin's history of Australian ornithology, *The Flight of the Emu* (2001), as well as her 2007 history of Australian nature and nationhood, *How a Continent Created a Nation*.

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