

RUSSELL MCGREGOR
IDLING IN GREEN PLACES: A
LIFE OF ALEC CHISHOLM
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Born in Maryborough in 1890 and dying in Sydney in 1977, ornithologist and journalist Alec Chisholm presided over periods of intense social change. In this biography Russell McGregor uses Chisholm's perspective as a man persistently on the sidelines of Australian public life to reflect upon the connections between environmentalism and the development of an Australian national identity. McGregor uses the relatively conventional structures of biography to construct a work of significant historical intervention. Rather than making a case for re-centring the influence of a man who has almost completely fallen from public remembrance, McGregor suggests that the study of such a fallible, naive, and yet passionate and active bystander may offer new perspectives on the dramatic changes Australia underwent in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Chisholm donated the bulk of his papers to the Mitchell Library. This is an enviable archive, which was masterfully used. McGregor's careful study of Chisholm's rhetorical style gives insights into his humanity, and into his profound belief in the

social and psychological connections between humans and birds. Although, especially in the earlier section of the book, these personal recollections could be more critically interrogated Chisholm's papers bring lively animation to the various worlds he inhabited. McGregor paints an insightful picture of rural social life at the turn of the century, before he and Chisholm turn their attention to Australia's literary world with correspondence between Chisholm and the likes of Mary Gilmore and CJ Dennis.

Chisholm becomes a vantage point from which McGregor tracks twentieth century Australian history. The positionality of Chisholm is perhaps best characterised by McGregor's reflection on Chisholm's trip to Germany in 1938, that 'Alec just happened to take his overseas holiday at one of the most politically precarious times in recent world history' (141). Chisholm as a subject offers two looks – out into Australian public life, his position of relative fame providing insight into the great dramas of twentieth century Australia, including the Dismissal of both Jack Lang and Gough Whitlam (the former of which, Chisholm claimed to be intimately involved in). He also offers a look into Australian private life, and slower ideological shifts. Perhaps the most striking example of this vantage point is an extraordinary chapter where, within a

matter of only a few years, Chisholm reports on a Nazi rally in Berlin, dines with Australian Prime Ministers, and gives ornithological tours to Japanese diplomats. However, it should be noted that McGregor is somewhat unwilling to take a more critical approach to what he describes as Chisholm's 'earnest naivety' (123) throughout this period.

McGregor is obviously limited by the perspective of his protagonist (who, it is noted, destroyed much of the documentation relating to the women who populated his personal life), and perhaps this is why the women throughout the book appear somewhat marginal. The experience of Indigenous Australians also seems to have been almost invisible to Chisholm and therefore also to McGregor. Given Chisholm's preoccupation with the ravages of non-native birds on local populations, his belief in the productive relationships between humans and nature, and of connection to land, it is not anachronistic to suggest that this omission feels egregious. Chisholm does dabble in his later years with questions of women's and racial equality – and so does McGregor. McGregor is perhaps too keen to excuse the extent to which Chisholm consistently failed to use his privileged vantage point to engage with the social changes he witnessed, or to partake in any but his own personal causes. McGregor

undercuts his otherwise balanced portrait of Chisholm as a naive and vain optimist with perhaps an overly stringent defence, which can read as an attack on Chisholm's critics. McGregor keenly defends Chisholm from the criticism of other academics who have been less willing to excuse his shortcomings, and blind spots, such as in his histories of women. Chisholm's own autobiography was criticised for being too 'alluvial' (226) and lacking in social comment. It is possible that the same is true of this biography.

Idling in Green Places is at its best when McGregor dives into the worlds of birders and ornithologists. The search for the Paradise Parrot in the interwar years is a good example of this. Chisholm's first book, *Mateship with Birds* represents the unique, although not altogether unproblematic influence of Chisholm on Australian culture; it is here where we begin to understand Chisholm's particular mix of romanticism, nationalism, populism, conservationism, and humanism. McGregor provides the reader with a profound sense of Chisholm's belief in his particular understanding of the world of birds and their human-like psychological profiles. The section on – in Chisholm's mind – the villainous cuckoo is a charming example of this. McGregor tracks the changes in conservation ideologies and orthodoxies with compassion and consideration. The

chapter on Chisholm's belligerent resistance to the move away from amateur humanist birding traditions towards less democratic, more scientific approaches to ornithology, and the mid-century connections between conservation and anti-development movements provide insight into often overlooked environmental and cultural changes during the mid-century.

By considering a man who himself believed in the connections between humanity and nature, McGregor also constructs a history that animates and links Australia's natural and social lives. In its reflection on national identity and individual passion, it is exciting. In its study of skilled popular mobilisation for the cause of conservation, it is a timely intervention.

Reviewed by Jessie Matheson