



Caroline Chisholm
The Emigrants' Friend
1808-1877

Caroline Chisholm was born at Northampton, 30 May 1808, and died in London, 25 March 1877, and yet regarded Australia as her adopted land.

She eased the path of thousands of migrants in this their new homeland. Her special concern for homeless girls and poor families during Australia's formative years caused her contemporaries to see her as 'the indispensable woman of the time'.

In Victoria her Shelter Sheds provided cheap and safe accommodation on the road to the Castlemaine Goldfields.

Caroline Chisholm may be described as a Christian humanist. She was inspired at once by the command 'Love thy neighbour' and the warm human sympathy of her own nature. Her sense of the worth of every human being prevented any trace of condescension or discrimination in her work. Charity, she said, should reach out to all creatures, 'as long as they bear the stamp of humanity.'

She felt her work had been given her to do 'by One who never allows his servants to stand still for want of materials'. To it she brought all her gifts of heart and intellect, and earned the gratitude of the Australian people.

For thirty years she worked to assist single women and families to migrate and settle in Australia. The idealistic and religious fervour for which she is now admired made her then a target for sectarian suspicion which added to the many difficulties she had to overcome.

She had to contend with the primitive conditions of a colonial society and a bitter religious controversy. She was handicapped by lack of material resources, but she had great personal assets. She had energy, human sympathy, administrative ability of a high order, personal charm and dignity, a husband unobtrusively devoted to her work, and undying faith in the cause to which she had so unselfishly put her hand.

Her conscience stirred, Caroline inquired what each girl could do and promised help. She called on her acquaintances and placed several girls as servants in homes. If Caroline vouched that they were decent--well, the ladies would give them a try. Those that Caroline couldn't place, she took home with her. Her housekeeper taught them a few skills, and soon Caroline found positions for them, too.

Meanwhile, she lobbied the government for an old barracks to house new arrivals. The governor resisted. Then Mary Teague, a newcomer, was charged with drunkenness. She protested that she was just wobbly from hunger, not having had a bite to eat in two days. The judge did not believe her and ordered her exposed in the stocks for an hour. When released, Mary wandered off until she collapsed. She was found lying in a ditch, near death, with nothing but the clothes on her back. The *Chronicle* printed the story.

Embarrassed, the governor finally gave Caroline a small space. She decided to spend the night there. "But I was put to the proof at starting: scarce was the light out, when I fancied a few dogs must be in the room, and, in some terror, I got a light." To her horror, she saw rats everywhere. She almost fled, but hesitated. If she ran now, she would be the laugh of the town. Her plan to shelter immigrant girls would be ruined. "I therefore lighted a second candle, and seating myself on the bed, kept there until three rats, descending from the roof, alighted on my shoulders. I knew that I was getting into a fever, in fact, that I should be very ill before morning; but to be out-generated by rats was too much..." She stuck it out and fed the vermin poison the next night.

Caroline devoted her leisure time to the poor girls, "determined with God's blessing, never to rest until decent protection was afforded them." This meant she had to leave her own children in care of others. She even established a job registry and drove girls into the country herself.

When churches would not help, she turned to God alone. The good she did was incalculable. That is why Australia later carried her picture on its five dollar bill for over twenty years.

Bibliography:

Caroline Chisholm was a great pioneer, the greatest of women pioneers in the history of Australia and yet she died in poverty and obscurity.

five dollar bill. Courtesy of Australian Reserve.

