

## PAPER III

### LITTLE JOE - BY CAROLINE CHISHOLM

#### 1. History and Overview of Little Joe

##### (a) Chisholm's Stage of Life:

Caroline Chisholm left Victoria for Sydney in 1858, with poor health and limited financial means. She was living at Redfern and witnessed the appalling conditions being endured by the working class people of the area, many of them immigrants.

Illness curtailed her physical activity, but left her more time to observe and think. Although Chisholm had previously used her pen and tongue to effect change, she could now reflect more deeply on the broader social and political issues of the period.

Her thoughts and opinions were presented at four public lectures and in a serialised fiction piece entitled Little Joe. The chronology was as follows:

Lecture One: Date - 8 July, 1859 Topic - Land Question

Little Joe: Serialised in *The Empire* between 26 December 1859 and 15 May 1860

Lecture Two: Date - 10 December 1860 Topic - Land Question

Lecture Three: Date - 21 February 1861 Topic - Early closing of shops

Lecture Four: Date 13 June 1861 Topic - Home Life

The lectures attracted large crowds including politicians like Jack Robertson and Charles Cowper.

## (b) The Political and Social Situation in New South Wales

The land question was to the fore in political debate, with most land held by the squatters and large sections of the population forced to live in squalid, overcrowded conditions in Sydney.

In fact, the situation of the working classes was so bad that the Government held an enquiry into the problem. Caroline Chisholm added her weight to those seeking reform, especially of land access.

Communication methods were such that public debate was conducted in the newspapers or at lectures. Chisholm effectively used these mediums to take part in the political process.

Also, about this time, Sydney was developing a vibrant literati of its own - e.g. the Stenhouse Circle - and the story was often used to make a point. Chisholm was familiar with many involved in this development.

## (c) The Story Itself

Little Joe is a window into the mind of Caroline Chisholm; a story with a purpose - to form public opinion and effect change. At times she is so intent on getting her point across that she moves out of story-telling mode to lecture the reader.

Though many of its themes are still controversial, a touch of Victorian primness confirms it as a tract of its times in terms of style.

Notably regular biblical allusions combine with contemporary reality in one of the earliest attempts to interpret Christianity in the Australian context.

## (d) Themes Covered in the Story

- \* The appalling living conditions in areas like Redfern - overcrowding, poor sanitation, etc.
- \* Homeless children
- \* Caring for widows and orphans

- \* The importance of kindness
- \* How husbands and wives should treat each other and the importance of family life
- \* Importance of education and the problems in the contemporary system
- \* She attacks the rich and extols the virtues of the working class
- \* State aid for religion
- \* Pew renting in churches
- \* The land question - the injustice of the squatters holding most of the land
- \* Vote by ballot, manhood suffrage and payment of members
- \* Early closing of shops and the shorter working day

## ***2. Social Thought of Caroline Chisholm***

Caroline Chisholm's reputation as a social thinker has been somewhat eclipsed by her philanthropic activities and as a result a lopsided picture of this great reformer has been left in the mind of the general population. She had definite views on most of the important issues of her time and, as is so often the case, her progressive views were sometimes way ahead of her time.

Her position on various issues is summarised here. It has been drawn from her lectures, Little Joe, other literary works and the projects she undertook throughout her life.

### **(a) Immigration**

For Caroline Chisholm industriousness derived from a happy home life and as a result she strongly advocated family-based immigration. That is, she supported families migrating as a unit and families being allowed to unite if migration or the convict system had separated them.

As well, migrants needed to be treated fairly on arrival and opportunities must exist for them to have a decent standard of living. If this couldn't be done at a given

time then the intake should be cut back.

On a number of occasions, for example at her lecture on 10 December 1860, she defended the Chinese in Australia, giving an indication that she would not have supported the White Australia Policy.

#### (b) Family Life

This is the basis of a happy life. So families have a right to a home of their own and to be free of the problems associated with tenancy. She condemned tyrannical landlords.

In Little Joe the impression is left that she fancied herself as a marriage counsellor.

#### (c) Land

She was a strong supporter of the campaign to “unlock the land”. Her objective was to have families living on small agricultural selections and found the land hungry squatters contemptible.

Overcrowded cities and towns were to be avoided as they destroyed family life and human dignity.

This view of the link between agriculture and healthy family life is fairly typical of Catholic thinkers at that time and for a good part of this century as well.

It is interesting to speculate on what her views would be today on this matter. Many Australian farm families are now under serious economic pressure, with all its attendant impact on family life, as a result of this sort of social thinking in Europe.

The agricultural trading policies of the European Economic Community are impacting on the incomes of Australian farmers and derive from the voting power of the farm lobby in countries like France and Ireland. To maintain the small family farms in these countries, subsidies are paid which distort world prices, and our farms, though often more efficient, are less viable.

#### (d) Education

Caroline Chisholm was an educator herself and loved children.

She did not believe in an education system based on fear conducive to learning and disliked corporal punishment.

As for the teaching process, she encouraged teachers to find out what the student already knew and build on that. The student's level of knowledge should be assessed before actual instruction began.

#### (e) Politics

Caroline Chisholm was an avowed democrat, something hardly controversial today, but which didn't enjoy universal approval at that time.

She wanted the working class to assume their proper role in the political life of the Colony. This meant introducing universal manhood suffrage, vote by ballot and payment for members of parliament. In the July 1859 lecture she even made the bold suggestion that women could be given the vote.

The movement for the early closing of shops and the general campaign for a shorter working day received her vigorous support.

#### (f) Religion and Faith

A devoted Christian, Caroline's faith was the cornerstone of her life and her social philosophy. Social structures, as with personal relationships, should be based on the laws of love and charity.

State aid for religious denominations was a hot political issue at the time and she took a position different to that espoused by most of the priests and bishops. She opposed state aid to the Church because it meant compromise. The Church should be true to its calling and not dependent on the secular authority. It forced the clergy away from the poor and others who needed them - it destroyed the bond between the clergy and the people.

She was very critical of the contemporary practice of renting pews in churches. The Church should be open to all, with no class distinction, and the Word of God free.

### 3. Little Joe as Political Rhetoric

Little Joe is an excellent example of mid-19th century political rhetoric.

Communication can be defined as meaningful contact between a “speaker” and “listener”, writer and reader.

Rhetoric, as a form of communication, is the art of persuasion - the art of influencing the thought of one’s hearers or readers. It is a method of communicating and comprehending social reality.

John Stuart Mill described it as the more or less skilful contrivances which enable us to dispose knowledge in clever ways and at needful moments.

Over the years rhetoric has undergone considerable change as a result of cultural change: from oral culture to printed culture to high technology culture.

As members of the high technology culture, many example of 19th century public oratory or discourse may not immediately strike us as political rhetoric. We are more accustomed to the clever line, the thirty second television or radio grab or the door-stop interview. In a high technology world, concepts often have to be communicated quickly and the result is such things as:

1. Well you’re gone. You’re a banana republic.

Instead of a lengthy discourse on why you would have to cut government spending and bring down a tough budget Paul Keating changed the political mood with just one line.

2. Fightback!

With the country in a recession at the time of its release and the population despondent, a clever title like this can appeal to the people’s sense that something has to be done and that we need to “fight back”.

However, Little Joe is from the period described as printed culture and it was written to persuade its readers.

Once invented, printing became a medium for active political controversy and 19th century Australian newspapers were no exception. Political ideas and speeches were frequently distributed as essays in newspapers or pamphlets. Little Joe is a

typical example of this phenomenon.

Rhetoric orders, clarifies, construes and proves matters of fact and probability and communicates this knowledge to the community.

In her four public lectures and Little Joe, Chisholm is either using political rhetoric, trying to make points to a large, diffuse audience, or she is extremely naive. Given her stage of life when Little Joe was written, and all she had been through and seen, it is unlikely she was naive.

The newspaper accounts of her four lectures indicate they were typical political meetings, with the speaker regularly interrupted by applause, laughter and cheering. Also, the extreme positions taken in Little Joe, such as the dichotomy she draws between the rich and the poor, are designed for persuasion. As well, Little Joe contains many excellent “one liners” that would stand on their own in any modern “thirty second grab”.

It is not hard to imagine the state aid for religion debate being conducted in front of television cameras and a 1990s politician dropping the line - “The foot of the missionary has never been found in a Government shoe” - as he or she walked through the front door of Parliament House.

Persuading a target audience is one function of rhetoric, but it also can serve to reinforce an existing constituency - to make it feel good about itself; to confirm and justify its belief structure.

One example of this is the tendency of all sides in Australian politics to placate the farm section with lines like: “Our farmers are the most efficient in the world”.

Chisholm uses sections of Little Joe to make the working people feel good themselves. The notion of workers entering the political arena was new in the mid-19th century and many would have lacked the confidence to take up the challenge. In Little Joe she apotheosizes the poor and the working classes, deprecating the wealthy, in an attempt to lift the self-confidence of the workers whom she wanted to see more active in politics.

#### ***4. Was Caroline Chisholm an Australian?***

The current debate over the Reserve Bank’s decision to redesign Australia’s bank notes and replace Caroline Chisholm with Queen Elizabeth II on the five dollar note issues a challenge to historians.

That challenge is to define and differentiate those who actually can be called Australians and those who, while playing a role in Australian history, were in reality British or some other nationality.

For example Captain James Cook has a place in Australian history, but he was not an Australian. The same applies to most of our early governors and a large block of other 19th century personalities.

Many were simply British citizens doing a stint in the antipodes -they cannot be called Australians.

This historical problem involves Caroline Chisholm and the question arises - was she Australian or British?

Caroline was born in England and died in England. Of a life spanning some seventy years she spent only twenty of these in Australia and she did not arrive in New South Wales as a settler, but on leave with her husband. That is, she arrived as the wife of a serving member of the British armed forces.

Clearly events took over and the course of her life changed, just as they did for someone like Father Brian Gore in the Philippines. However, while Father Gore is largely remembered for his work in the Philippines, no one would dispute that he is an Australian and not a Filipino.

The same issue arises for Caroline Chisholm - was she a prominent Australian or an English woman playing a prominent part in Australian history?

Arguments like that over the five dollar note mean the question is more than historical trivia and it also has immense significance for her possible canonisation by the Catholic Church.

Would she be an Australian saint or an English saint remembered for her work in Australia?

It is only intended to raise the issue here, not solve it. Clearly Australian historians have to debate this controversy and develop guidelines for determining nationality.



## 5. Significance of Little Joe

Little Joe has an important place in Australia's literary history. Not only is it the only known fiction work by this high profile historical identity, but it was one of the first, if not the first, significant political tracts by a woman in the nation's history. So it is of general historical and literary interest and also holds a special place in the study of women and politics.

Given the tenor of the arguments pursued in the story, it should also be studied by labour movement historians. Caroline Chisholm was a respected and effective public figure and her support for reforms like the eight hour day, early closing of shops and working class participation in the political process would have been a significant intervention at the time. It certainly would have been a morale booster for the early trade union movement.

Little Joe is also one of the earliest literary attempts to interpret Christianity in the Australian context and, as such, is of interest to theologians, religious historians and preachers. The themes and story lines still hold spiritual value for the present day Australian reader.

Many of the issues dealt with in Little Joe are still being confronted - homeless children, education, single parents, family struggles, immigration, etc. The discovery of this story will ensure Chisholm is viewed as a keen social reformer with a very definite and progressive social policy, as well as a philanthropist. She is a thinker and a "doer".

John Moran

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### ***COPIES OF LITTLE JOE***

Copies of Little Joe by Caroline Chisholm can be obtained from:

PREFERENTIAL PUBLICATIONS  
PO BOX 154  
ASHGROVE QLD 4060

The cost is \$10-00 per copy plus \$2-50 p. & p. A set of 10 copies costs only \$70-00 plus \$8-00 p & p. Payment and return address must accompany order.