Mateship with Birds: An Australian Plea for Conservation

Russell McGregor

Summary

"Mateship with Birds," the title of Alec Chisholm's first book, epitomizes his approach to conservation. He wanted his fellow Australians to bond emotionally with the birds, animals, and plants around them, and he framed his advocacy in the nationalist idioms of that country. Nationalism was central to his conservation, as he tried to foster a robust sense of belonging to place for the benefit of both the Australian people and their non-human compatriots.



Alec Chisholm birding at Lamington National Park, 1949.

Unknown photographer, 1949.
Courtesy of Mitchell Library, PXA 1772, box 3.

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Mateship with Birds was Australian naturalist Alec Chisholm's first book, written during his eight-year sojourn in Brisbane. Over a long life (1890–1977) he wrote more than 20 books, mostly on birds, but none had a more evocative title than this one, published in 1922. "Mateship" was meant in the common Australian sense of comradeship, and Chisholm deliberately tied his usage of the word to the powerfully nationalist resonances it had already acquired. Australians, he urged, should open their hearts to their avian compatriots.

From the 1920s to the 1960s, Chisholm was one of Australia's most popular nature writers. His writings were exuberant, conveying an emotional response to the natural world while at the same time minutely documenting it. He wanted Australians not only to observe and understand nature but also to love it and to embrace Australia's birds and animals as their friends—their mates in the local idiom. Only by doing so would they come to feel that they truly belonged to the land in which they lived.

When *Mateship with Birds* was published, Australian nationhood was ambivalent. While Australians treasured their national distinctiveness, many still called Britain "Home" and held a nostalgic affection for an Old Country most had never seen. Chisholm was not anti-British, but he wanted to strengthen the Australian people's attachment to their Australian homeland by fostering familiarity with local nature. A place-centered nationalism, he believed, would benefit both the Australian people and their non-human compatriots. It would also kindle a commitment to conservation.

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Frontispiece of *Mateship with Birds*: Alec Chisholm and friend photographing a Crested Shrike-tit's nest, 1914.

Unknown photographer, 1914.
Courtesy of Mitchell Library, PXA 1772, box 3.

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Chisholm's conservation was underpinned by Romantic notions of the human need to commune with nature. It rested as much—if not more—on aesthetic as on ecological principles. Following a humanistic tradition of nature appreciation, he regarded flora and fauna as essential components of the national heritage, to be cherished and protected accordingly.

Chisholm was not unique in bonding nature to nation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nationalism was a major taproot nourishing conservation not only in Australia but also in the cognate settler societies of the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. The nature-nation connection was transnational, but Chisholm gave it a distinctively Australian inflection, advertised in his employment of the vocabulary of "mateship" and "the bush."

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Education for conservation: Alec Chisholm giving an outdoors nature studies class to a group of Victorian schoolgirls, ca. 1914.

Unknown photographer, ca. 1914.
Courtesy of Mitchell Library, PXA 1772, box 5.

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Nationalist naturalist though he was, Chisholm's nationalism was not the same as the "scenic nationalism" identified by American historians Roderick Nash and Alfred Runte as a major impetus behind the preservation of wilderness in North America. Their scenic nationalism emphasized the aesthetics of the sublime, privileging awe-inspiring natural wonders such as Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon. Chisholm's nature, by contrast, was homely.

The nature Chisholm wanted Australians to identify with was, primarily, the nature they could experience just beyond their back fences: the gum trees and gullies, birds and wildflowers familiar to residents of the populous parts of the country. Occasionally in his writings he lauded the sublime scenery of the Blue Mountains or the Lamington Plateau, but for the most part he looked in wonder and reverence at the small, commonplace things in nature. Those were the things that would foster a spirit of mateship.

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Alec Chisholm (far left) at Goomeri, a small town near Gayndah, addressing school children and their parents on the need for conservation, 1921. Chisholm was a prolific propagandist for the conservationist cause.

Unknown photographer, 1921.
Courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Collection PXA 1772, box 6.

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"Wilderness" was a term Chisholm never used. While he admired what might be called "unmodified" or "primal" nature, he equally admired landscapes that had been transformed by human hands, provided it had been done in a manner that (in his assessment) helped people connect with nature rather than alienating them from it. His conservation did not entail sequestering people from nature but rather the humanizing of nature, bringing nature and culture into mutually beneficial interaction.

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Inspecting a Nest: Alec Chisholm's nature studies class, Maryborough High School, 1914.

Unknown photographer, 1914.
Courtesy of Mitchell Library, PXA 1772, box 19.

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Although Chisholm characterized Aboriginal people as "natural conservationists," he did not regard the Aboriginal relationship to place as one that settler Australians might emulate. Like most Australians of his generation, he saw Aboriginal culture as a thing of the past, to be superseded by a new "Australian folklore" animated by Western notions of nature.

Chisholm's nature writings were steeped in anthropomorphism, imbuing birds with qualities such as artistry, playfulness, aesthetic sensibility, and *joie de vivre*. These qualities, he realized, helped people bond with birds. So did attractive common names. "We seem to like best those birds which have been given homely and pleasant titles," he explained, for thereby "they become, as it were, members of our family, and we speak of them as we do of close friends." Chisholm's conservationist advocacy relied far more on persuading people to love living things than on convincing them that nature constituted a fragile ecosystem at risk of breakdown from human interference.

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Australians, Chisholm urged, must cultivate a "fraternal attitude towards birds … if we as a nation are to develop any real measure of alliance with our native earth." It would be reductionist to characterize his contributions to ornithology and nature appreciation as mere bolsters to Australian nationalism. They were far more than that. He always insisted that birds and animals must be valued for their own sake as well as for human purposes. Nonetheless, the nationalist component of Chisholm's nature writings was overt, and he was perfectly frank about using nature to boost nationhood, and nationalism to foster love of Australian nature.

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Further readings:

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Related links:

- Russell McGregor, "The Tragedy of the Paradise Parrot," *Arcadia*, 2021 https://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/9340
- Russell McGregor, "Alec Chisholm: Bush Naturalist and Benign Nationalist," State Library of New South Wales. https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/alec-chisholm-bush-naturalist-and-benign-nationalist
- Tess Kloot, "Alexander Hugh (Alec) Chisholm (1890–1977)," Australian Dictionary of Biography. http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/chisholm-alexander-hugh-alec-9741
- Alexander Hugh Chisholm interviewed by Mel Pratt, June 1972, National Library of Australia. https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2288737
- Resources for Alec Hugh Chisholm, National Library of Australia. https://trove.nla.gov.au/people/459096
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- "Great Bird Man," The Brisbane Courier, 28 May 1932.

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Russell McGregor is an adjunct professor of history at James Cook University and the author of several award-winning books. His latest, *Idling in Green Places*, was shortlisted for the 2020 National Biography Award. His major current research project, on the history of birdwatching in Australia, is enlivened by his own enthusiast for birding.

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