

**Mateship with Nature:
Nationalism and conservation in the writings of Alec Chisholm¹**

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Alec Chisholm (1890–1977) was once one of Australia’s most popular nature writers. In 1966 Vince Serventy, a fellow nature writer of a younger generation, called him the ‘most famous of modern naturalists’.² Chisholm’s nature 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 embrace Australia’s birds and animals as part of their own identity. His enthusiasm seems to have been infectious since he had an eager readership among Australians from all walks of life. Sometimes bluntly, sometimes subtly, Chisholm wove a conservationist message through his nature writings. He also yoked an appreciation of Australian nature to the advancement of Australian nationalism.

Chisholm was not alone in bonding nature to nation. Many of his fellow nature writers in the early and mid-twentieth century made the same connection. Indeed, nationalism was then a major taproot nourishing nature conservation not only in Australia but also in the cognate settler societies of the United States, Canada and New Zealand.³ Nonetheless, Chisholm construed the nature–nation connection in particular ways and tried to cultivate distinctively Australian ways of loving nature. His writings shed a revealing light on the development of ideas about nature and conservation in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

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2. Vincent Serventy, *A Continent in Danger* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966), 143.

3. Thomas Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora: Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially ch.7; Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Libby Robin, *How a Continent created a Nation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).

Historians have only recently begun investigating the evolution of a conservationist ethos in Australia prior to the advent of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ Drew Hutton and Libby Connors provide a good overview in their *History of the Australian Environment Movement*, which applauds the work of early conservationists including the one here under consideration, Alec Chisholm. However, Hutton and Connors tend to assimilate the conceptual worlds of earlier times to that of the present day, and downplay the discrepancies between conservationism in the early twentieth century and now.⁵ Tom Griffiths, in *Hunters and Collectors*, gives a more finely nuanced appraisal of the outlooks of early twentieth-century Australian (especially Victorian) naturalists, including, again, some attention to Chisholm. He observes that those naturalists assumed a congruence between history and natural history – or a compatibility of culture and nature – that was lost by a later generation of wilderness devotees.⁶ Conservation, for these early proponents of the cause, did not entail sequestering people from nature, but rather the humanising of nature, bringing nature into the domain of culture, and vice versa. That was certainly Chisholm's aim.

Several historians, notably Libby Robin and Thomas Dunlap, have examined the role of the sciences (especially ecology) in shaping attitudes toward nature and fostering conservationist values in pre-1970s Australia.⁷ Robin, Dunlap and Griffiths have also disentangled some of

4.Scholarship on this topic is much stronger for America and Europe; see for example Michael Egan & Jeff Crane (eds), *Natural Protest: Essays on the History of American Environmentalism* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Daniel Philippon, *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers shaped the Environmental Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5.Drew Hutton & Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17-88. For conservation in nineteenth-century Australia, see Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2000); JM Powell, *Environmental Management in Australia, 1788-1914: Guardians, improvers and profit* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1976).

6.Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*.

7.Robin, *How a Continent created a Nation*; Libby Robin, 'Radical Ecology and Conservation Science: An Australian Perspective', *Environment and History* 4, no.2 (1998): 191-208; Libby Robin, 'Ecology: A Science of Empire', in Tom Griffiths & Libby Robin

the nationalist strands that threaded through the history of Australian appreciations of nature.⁸ Anthropologists Nicholas Smith and Ghassan Hage, as well as sociologist Adrian Franklin, have further interrogated the intertwining of discourses of nature and nationalism in Australia, although their analyses tend to concentrate on recent environmentalist writings.⁹ This article builds on those studies of the history of conservation and the nature–nation entanglement, taking as its focus the writings of a single individual. This focus facilitates a fine-grained perspective, well suited to teasing out the complexities and ambiguities that wove through the evolution of a conservationist ethos in Australia.

Chisholm’s love of living things, especially birds, shines through his writings; his devotion to their preservation was clearly heartfelt; his commitment to conservation was attested by public acclamation. Yet his love of living things and his reasons for preserving them were in crucial ways different to the ways in which environmentalists today would construe such matters.¹⁰ This was not due to idiosyncrasy on Chisholm’s part. To the contrary, his attitudes and values accorded with those current among his contemporaries. He was, after all, a populariser, not an innovator at the cutting edge of new ideas. Largely self-educated (he left

(eds), *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 63-75; Thomas Dunlap, ‘Ecology and Environmentalism in the Anglo Settler Colonies’, in Griffiths & Robin (eds), *Ecology and Empire*, 76-86.

8. Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora*; Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*; Robin, *How a Continent created a Nation*; Libby Robin, ‘Nationalising Nature: Wattle Days in Australia’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 26, no.73 (2002): 13-26; Jane Curruthers & Libby Robin, ‘Taxonomic Imperialism in the Battles for Acacia: Identity and Science in South Africa and Australia’, *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 65, no.1 (2010): 48-64.

9. Nicholas Smith, ‘Blood and Soil: Nature, Native and Nation in the Australian Imaginary’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 35, no.1 (2011): 1-18; Adrian Franklin, *Animal Nation: The True Story of Animals and Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006); Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998), 168.

10. On the conceptual differences between conservationism in the early twentieth century and environmentalism later in that century, see Thomas Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora*; Libby Robin & Max Day, ‘Changing Ideas about the Environment in Australia: Learning from Stockholm’, *Historical Records of Australian Science* 28 (2017): 37-49

school at the age of twelve), his profession was journalism and his forte was communicating with a mass audience. He was quite prepared to confront attitudes and actions he considered misguided; in fact, he acquired in his latter years a reputation as a fractious old man.¹¹ But he knew how to frame a proposition so as to maximise its chances of a positive public hearing, and his popularity as a nature writer suggests that his ear was finely tuned to what the public – or a substantial part of it – wanted to hear. Scrutinising his writings can illuminate the values and beliefs not only of Chisholm himself but also of the milieu for whom he wrote.

Inevitably, over his long career as a public commentator – it lasted almost 70 years, from 1908 until his death in 1977 – the emphases in Chisholm’s conservationist message shifted. In his younger days, his efforts were directed mainly against the direct human destruction of wildlife by shooting, trapping, nest-robbing and so forth. The earliest conservation campaign in which he became engaged, in collaboration with the poet Mary Gilmore, was against the shooting of egrets for the millinery trade in 1908.¹² Over time, he came to place more emphasis on the problem of habitat destruction and the consequent need for national parks and other sanctuaries for the preservation of species.¹³ Later still, especially after the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, he became increasingly alarmed by the threat of pesticides and other poisons.¹⁴ One thing that remained constant was his conviction that the true patriot should cherish the flora, fauna and landscapes of his or her native land and strive to preserve them as part of the national heritage.

In some ways, Chisholm’s nationalism dovetailed with the Australian nationalism of the

11. Tess Kloot, ‘Alexander Hugh Chisholm: 1890-1977’ [obituary], *Australian Bird Watcher* 7, no.4 (December 1977): 103-112.

12. Alec H Chisholm (hereafter AHC), *The Joy of the Earth* (Sydney: Collins, 1969), 169-171.

13. See for example AHC, ‘Is the whole thing hopeless?’, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 1923, clipping in Mitchell Library (hereafter ML), Alec H Chisholm Papers, MSS 3540, box 5010; AHC, ‘The Wonder of Australian Animals’, *Walkabout*, 1 January 1937, 22-29.

14. See for example AHC, ‘The Silent Spring is closing in’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 1968, clipping in ML, MSS 3540, box 5010.

decade of his birth, the 1890s.¹⁵ Like that of his predecessors, his nationalism gloried in the bush and the distinctive landscapes of Australia. Far more than those predecessors, however, he yoked nationalism to the conservation of nature. His nationalism was about people bonding emotionally with their homeland through love of the living things that dwelt there. It was a nationalism that celebrated not the mateship of bush workers, as in the writings of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, but rather the attainment of ‘mateship with birds’, as Chisholm put it in the title of his first book. It was not a tub-thumping nationalism of the kind that became associated with the Anzac legend after the First World War, but a nationalism that emphasised love of nature and attachment to place.¹⁶ Its iconic figure was not the soldier, so central to the Anzac legend, but the birdwatcher. It is a strand of Australian nationalism that deserves more attention than it has so far received.

Nature and Nation

Among Chisholm’s many books, none was more evocatively titled than the first, *Mateship with Birds*, published in 1922. In flowery prose studded with stanzas of quoted verse, he encouraged his readers to cherish the birds around them as fellow members of the community of Australians.¹⁷ Birds were Chisholm’s first love and his primary area of expertise; but whether writing about birds or about natural history more generally, he sought to arouse in readers both affection for nature and attachment to their native land, and thereby kindle a commitment to conservation. Under the headline ‘Know Your Own Land’ in a January 1934 issue of the Melbourne *Argus*, he argued that properly-taught nature studies programs in schools would boost the students’ patriotism.¹⁸ Thirty years later in the *Gould League Notes*,

15. See John Carroll (ed.), *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982); Robert Birrell, *A Nation of Our Own: Citizenship and Nation-building in Federation Australia* (Melbourne: Longman, 1995), 79-121; Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 63–109.

16. On the Anzac legend see Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2013); Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, new edn, 2013); White, *Inventing Australia*, 125-139.

17. AHC, *Mateship with Birds* (Melbourne, Whitcombe & Tombs, 1922).

18. AHC, ‘Know Your Own Land’, *Argus*, 27 January 1934, 9.

a magazine addressed to children, he was still insisting that the ‘genuine patriot’ must be familiar with the natural history of the lands on which he or she lived.¹⁹

Readers and critics were attuned to Chisholm’s message. One of his many correspondents praised *Mateship with Birds* because

it creates and nourishes in a most winsome way a young Australian’s love for Australia.... I know no better way of binding a people affectionately to their own soil than to make them love its birds and its bush. From a patriotism so nourished will spring a literature, song, poetry and prose which will be strong and true. So that you are, by your work, helping to deepen and enrich Australia’s spiritual life.²⁰

Reviewing another of Chisholm’s books, *Birds and Green Places*, the doyen of popular nature writers in early twentieth-century Australia, Donald Macdonald, commended it for helping young readers ‘to become good Australians.’²¹

Chisholm was not the first ornithologist to link love of nature with love of country and give the combination a conservationist slant. In 1911, when Chisholm was just beginning to gain public notice, JA Leach published the first field guide to Australian birds. More than just telling people how to match birds with names, Leach exhorted Australians to cultivate ‘an interest and pride in things Australian’ and to be ‘proud of your heritage, and pass it on uninjured’. His book carried an introduction by Frank Tate, a reformist Victorian Director of Education who was even more emphatic about the nationalist concomitants of nature appreciation. He wanted Australians ‘to look upon the characteristic beauties of our Australian skies, our trees, our flowers, our birds with passionate appreciation’ and so come to love this land. Among children especially, he considered this passionate appreciation to be already growing, and he drew attention to a transformation whereby the rising generation was shedding their parents’ attachment to the imagined landscapes of Britain and replacing it with

19.AHC ‘The Invitation of the Birds’, *Gould League Notes*, 1965, 8-10, ML, MSS 3540, box 5009.

20.PAS [identity of writer unknown] to AHC, 1 July 1923, ML, MSS 3540, box 4988.

21.Donald Macdonald, ‘Notes for Boys’, *Argus*, 10 September 1929, 15.

devotion to the natural beauty of the land of their birth.²² Tate may have been a little premature about this, but his remarks highlight the fact that Chisholm wrote for an audience already primed for his message.

Like Leach, Chisholm considered birds the denizens of nature to which people could most readily relate. While he insisted that birds should be valued for their own sake and not only for human purposes, he clearly expressed the notion that birds had – at least potentially – a special place in human affections which could be mobilised to strengthen the bonds of place. Australians, he 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.’²³ It would be reductionist and wrong to characterise Chisholm’s contributions to ornithology as no more than bolsters to Australian nationalism. They were far more than that, although the nationalist component was obtrusive and Chisholm was quite frank about using nature to boost nationhood.

In 1948, Rex Ingamells, founder of the Jindyworobak nationalist literary movement, asked Chisholm to contribute a message of support to his soon-to-be-published *Jindyworobak Review*, celebrating the group’s tenth anniversary.²⁴ In his response, Chisholm not only endorsed the Jindyworobak ambition to spiritualise the bonds between people and place; he also affirmed that naturalists are nationalists:

Naturalists in Australia ... have a warm regard for the work of the Jindyworobaks. We look upon them as comrades-in-arms. Our people are their people, our ideals are their ideals. The only distinction is that we are concerned largely with the matter-of-fact

22.JA Leach, *An Australian Bird Book: A Pocket Book for Field Use* (Melbourne: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1911), 190; Frank Tate, ‘Introduction’ to *ibid*, 1-6. Tate’s dwelling on the land of birth aspect echoes the views of the contemporary nationalist organisation, the Australian Natives Association.

23.AHC, ‘Good Neighbours – Sometimes’, *Walkabout*, 1 September 1947, 35, ML, MSS 3540, box 5009.

24.R Ingamells to AHC, 8 January & 20 January 1948, ML, MSS 3540, box 4973. On the Jindyworobaks, see Brian Elliott, ‘Introduction’ to B Elliott (ed.), *The Jindyworobaks* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979), xvii-lxvi; Ellen Smith, ‘Local Moderns: The Jindyworobak Movement and Australian Modernism’, *Australian Literary Studies* 27, no.1 (2012): 1-17.

while they are devoted to the spirit-of-fact—and that, maybe, is not only a distinction without a difference but a collateral aim.

... Our feeling – our religion if you like – is that patriotism can be regarded as essentially sound only when it is based upon, or at least stimulated by, knowledge and appreciation of one's own country.

He advised that naturalists should also cultivate 'an international outlook', but their special task was a national one: 'to build our country to mellow nationhood; and that I conceive, is also the ideal of the Jindyworobak group'.²⁵

Jindyworobak fellow traveller though he was, Chisholm also valued Australia's connectedness to Britain. Like most Australians of his generation, he lived easily with dual allegiances to Britain and Australia.²⁶ Arriving in England in May 1938 he was greeted by the singing of skylarks, with which he was already familiar from Melbourne and Sydney. He delighted in the connection thus made between Britain and Australia via an introduced (from Australia's perspective) bird.²⁷ Within days of his arrival, he made the pilgrimage to Selborne, home of the renowned eighteenth-century naturalist Gilbert White, in company with his wife, Olive, and the ornithologist WB Alexander.²⁸ Throughout his visit, he was especially impressed by the rural landscapes of Britain and the British people's comfortable sense of belonging to place.

In West Wittering, a village in Sussex and home of Hugh Dent, the publisher of Chisholm's 1932 book *Nature Fantasy in Australia*, he remarked on the seamless union of nature and culture. In a passage resonant with the sentiments of Gilbert White, he enthused over what he saw: 'For here, as in so many English towns and villages, the visitor feels again the smooth

25. 'A Message from Mr AH Chisholm', *Jindyworobak Review 1938-1948* (Melbourne, Jindyworobak, 1948), 33-34.

26. Russell McGregor, 'The Necessity of Britishness: Ethno-cultural roots of Australian nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism* 12, no.3 (2006): 493-511.

27. AHC, *The Incredible Year: An Australian sees Europe in 'Adolf Hitler Weather'* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1944), 9.

28. AHC, *Incredible Year*, 28-33.

blending of nature and humanity born of centuries of association, so that observation of man and man's handiwork leads inevitably to observations of birds and trees and flowers'.²⁹

While Chisholm admired what we might call unmodified nature – or 'wilderness', a term he never used – he equally admired landscapes that had been transformed by humanity, provided it had been done in a manner that (in his assessment) helped people connect with nature rather than alienating them from it.

Chisholm extolled the intensity of the British people's connectedness to their country – 'the powerful, intimate, mellow association between earth and man that has developed in this fertile soil over thousands of years' – and yearned for Australians to develop a similarly strong connectedness to their very different lands:

I realize now, more than ever before, how potent is the influence of climate and soil, and even the contour of a landscape, on the culture and behaviour of a people. For my own part, "I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of ragged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains"; but I realize, in greater measure than previously, why the early literature of Australia was shot through with nostalgic longings of men from Britain, and I wonder vaguely whether the harsher and more expansive soil of Australia will be brought in some time to a state of complete intimacy with man – whether the Bush and its people will fulfil the prophesy of Bernard O'Dowd:

"Love-lit, her Chaos shall become Creation:

"And, dewed with dream, her Silence flower in song."³⁰

He conceived bonding with country as an interactive process: nature would shape human beings while humans shaped nature.

Like many Australians of his generation, Chisholm not only took Britain as his primary point for international comparison; he also indulged in friendly rivalry over which was the better place, the United Kingdom or Australia. Unlike most who indulged in this banter, his rivalry centred on natural attributes: which country had the most attractive animals, the best bird

29.AHC, *Incredible Year*, 65.

30.AHC, *Incredible Year*, 223.

songsters and so forth. One of the first things he did after arriving in England in May 1938 was to go birding on the Wiltshire Downs; and as both a birder and a nationalist, he could not resist frequent comparisons. English birds were wonderful songsters, especially in chorus, he conceded, but Australian birds offered ‘more vocal variety, both in tone and range, than the birds of Britain appear to possess’. In any event, he boasted, the lyrebird out-sung all the birds of Britain and Australia had over three times as many species as the British Isles.³¹

Birdsong was among Chisholm’s greatest passions and an area in which he had exceptional expertise. Always eager to refute ‘the old idea that Australia is a land of songless bright birds’, he lost no opportunity to laud the musical talents of Australian birds.³² When the world’s greatest authority on birdsong, American philosopher and theologian Professor Charles Hartshorne, ranked Australia’s Superb Lyrebird first among the world’s avian songsters, and the Albert’s Lyrebird second, Chisholm was delighted and enthusiastically told Hartshorne so.³³ He was delighted, too, when the Australian composer Nigel Butterley composed a charming piece for recorder and harpsichord based on the song of the White-throated Gerygone.³⁴ Chisholm delighted in these things for more than aesthetic reasons. He believed that by appreciating the musicality of Australia’s birds, the Australian people would deepen their sense of belonging to this country. The music of birds could harmonise people with place.

Homely Nature

Although Chisholm stressed the need for an intimate acquaintance with nature as a prerequisite for a healthy sense of national belonging, he never visited remote Australia and seldom ventured beyond the bounds of settled Australia in the east and south. In this respect, he differed from contemporaries such as Arthur Groom and Charles Barrett, who were also

31.AHC, *Incredible Year*, 9-14.

32.AHC, *News from Nature: A Selection of Seasonal Gossip* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1948), 7; see also AHC, ‘Bush Notes’, *Australasian*, 14 July 1934, 42.

33.Correspondence between AHC and Hartshorne, September 1952–July 1953, ML, MSS 3540, box 4986.

34.N Butterley to AHC, 8 April 1965, with annotation by AHC, ML, MSS 3540, box 5009.

nationalist naturalists but whose travels and writings probed into the arid interior and the tropical north. Chisholm's natural history writings dealt with nature inside the arc of settled Australia. Indeed, to a large extent they documented nature in and near its great cities: Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. His national homeland was not the Australia of the vast open spaces of the north and centre, but the more homely bushlands and urban hinterlands of the near-coastal fringe.

Occasionally, Chisholm did comment on nature in the remoter regions. In 1929, a time of lively public controversy over whether central and northern Australia could or should sustain a large population, he aligned with the negative case. Referring to the western plains of Queensland, he judged that there was 'little possibility of them ever becoming much more closely settled than they are today'. The lands were 'not suitable for intense cultivation, and can scarcely be expected to accommodate many additions to the scattered townships and pastoral stations now existing. From a "civilised" viewpoint this may be a matter of regret; to the naturalist it carries a considerable measure of consolation' since a sparse population would allow the birds and other fauna to continue to thrive.³⁵ He occasionally revisited the topic in later years, always with the same message: most of northern and central Australia was unsuited to close settlement and this was advantageous for the wildlife there.³⁶ But these were just occasional remarks. The body of his work was about nature in the easily accessible parts of Australia.

While Chisholm yoked together nature and nation, what he advocated was not the same as the scenic nationalism identified by American historians Roderick Nash and Alfred Runte as a major factor behind the preservation of wilderness in New World societies.³⁷ Their scenic

35.AHC, *Birds and Green Places: A Book of Australian Nature Gossip* (London: Dent, 1929), 45-46. On contemporary controversies over populating the north, see Russell McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood in Australia: Revisiting the Empty North* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

36. See for example AHC, 'The National Parks of Australia', typescript, ca.1952, ML, MSS 3540, box 5004.

37. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

nationalism privileged grand, awe-inspiring natural wonders such as could be found at Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon, as substitutes for the celebrated and stately cultural monuments of the Old World. Its aesthetics emphasised the sublime in nature. Chisholm's nature, by contrast, was much more homely.³⁸ The nature he wanted Australians to identify with was, primarily, the nature they could experience just beyond their back fences: the gum trees and birds, gullies and hills familiar to the residents of the populous parts of the country. Occasionally in his writings he lauded the sublime scenery of the Blue Mountains or the grandeur of the Macpherson Range.³⁹ But for the most part he looked in wonder and reverence at the small, commonplace things in nature.

It is commonly claimed that interest in urban nature and urban conservation appeared in Australia only in the last few decades. Even scholars specialising in the field have perpetuated that misunderstanding.⁴⁰ Chisholm's nature writings might stand as a corrective. He wrote about urban nature, and the need to conserve the plants, animals and natural features of urban areas, from the 1930s onward. Of course, his approach to urban nature and his conceptions of conservation differed from those in vogue today. The Australian public only began to become acquainted with ecology in the 1940s; and not until the 1950s did ecological science become central to nature conservation.⁴¹ Even then, Chisholm (like many of his fellow naturalists) continued to write within an older tradition of natural history rather than in the newfangled language of ecology. He never embraced the radical environmentalism that emerged during his old age in the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, he

38. This may have been a manifestation of a broader difference in attitudes toward nature in the USA and Australia, the former emphasising the sublime, the latter taking a more mundane perspective; see Melissa Harper & Richard White, 'How National were the First National Parks? Comparative Perspectives from the British Settler Societies', in Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler and Patrick Kupper (eds), *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 50-67.

39. See for example AHC, 'The Great National Parks Movement: Romeo Watkins Lahey Memorial Lecture, 26 August 1971', *NPA News*, March 1972, 4.

40. See for example Aidan Davison & Ben Ridder, 'Turbulent times for urban nature: conserving and re-inventing nature in Australian cities', *Australian Zoologist* 33, no.3 (2006): 306-314.

41. Robin, 'Radical Ecology and Conservation Science'.

was, as described by a Sydney journalist in 1967, ‘an evangelist of long standing’ for the conservationist cause.⁴²

While concern for urban nature surfaces often in Chisholm’s writings, two of his books stand out in this regard. One, *News from Nature* (1948), was essentially a natural history of Melbourne; I shall return to it later in this article. The other was *Nature Fantasy in Australia*, published in 1932. Despite the title, the book was devoted to the natural history of Sydney and its hinterland, extending no further than 50 miles from the city centre.⁴³

In some passages in *Nature Fantasy*, Chisholm took a forthright stance against the human despoliation of nature. After deploring the killing of Fairy Penguins at Manly, for example, he added that ‘man marks the earth with ruin’ and ‘humanity is scarring the earth, destroying forests and banishing mammals and birds’.⁴⁴ However, a more prominent theme in the book is how smoothly nature and humanity had come to coexist in this vast urban expanse. Praising both the city and the environment upon which it was built, he enthused over the sandstone areas in and around Sydney:

It is the sandstone, fashioned into a thousand rugged hills and vales, austere to outward seeming yet shot with fantasy, that has forced settlement to spread in a vagrant manner; and it is these expanses of rock that have impelled people of northern Sydney to preserve so much of the original landscape – more, possibly, than is manifest in any other worthy city. Here Nature and man, each unable to vanquish the other, have seemingly agreed to co-operate, with the result that northern Sydney is the most picturesque suburban area in Australia.⁴⁵

He went further, suggesting that the advent of the city may have enhanced the natural

42.AHC to D Serventy, 28 August 1967, ML, MSS 3540, box 4993.

43.Chisholm admitted that ‘Sydney’ was omitted from the title because it would deter potential readers (and buyers) from elsewhere in Australia, especially Melbourne; AHC, ‘Naming the Book’, *Bulletin*, 16 December 1931, clipping in ML, MSS 3540, box 4988

44.AHC, *Nature Fantasy in Australia* (London: Dent, 1932), 90-91.

45.AHC, *Nature Fantasy*, 5.

splendours of the region:

Indeed, it seems to me (with purely artificial considerations set aside) that the ancient sandstone is more attractive now than it was when Sydney was born in 1788. And if it be thought heresy in a nature-writer to say this, I retort that such a landscape can never wholly lose its savour, and that it has become more genial, more tractable, less grimly aloof than the primitive scene that challenged British eyes in the dawn of white settlement in Australia.⁴⁶

Here again, Chisholm was celebrating a coming together of nature and humanity, a coalescing of the human and non-human into something greater than either alone. It was a view of nature informed more by aesthetics than ecology, and that yearned not for purity in nature but for the integration of humanity with the natural world.

Chisholm's admiration, however, focussed on those parts of the Sydney region, especially its north, whose character was shaped by its sandstone geology. On southern Sydney he was not so complimentary. In one passage, he intimated that the environs of Botany Bay were not particularly worth preserving because they were not representative of 'the best elements of the Sydney landscape'; they were mere 'sand-hills and salt-marshes'.⁴⁷ He acknowledged that his assessment was based on human aesthetic preferences, but his misgivings highlight the limits of Chisholm's conservationism. Those limits in a different domain are illuminated in another passage in *Nature Fantasy*, where he recounted how he and a 'brother naturalist' killed a tiger snake that was threatening a pair of heath-wrens and their two fledglings. He expressed no scruples about killing the snake; in fact, he implied that by protecting the birds, they were fulfilling a duty to nature.⁴⁸

The back-cover blurb of *Nature Fantasy* acclaimed it as an Australian version of Gilbert White's eighteenth-century classic, *The Natural History of Selborne*. This was publisher's puffery, but also partly true. Like White's book, Chisholm's *Nature Fantasy* was not only a

46.AHC, *Nature Fantasy*, 7-8.

47.AHC, *Nature Fantasy*, 65-66.

48.AHC, *Nature Fantasy*, 140.

work of natural history but also an affectionate tribute to a particular place and a meditation on personal relationships with the plants and animals that lived there. Book reviewers relished the comparison. Sydney Elliott Napier, writing in the *Sydney Mail*, judged the book to possess ‘a felicity of style, a humour, and a complete knowledge of its subject which put it, without any doubt at all, in the same category as, and a fitting shelf companion for, the famous “Selborne” of Gilbert White’.⁴⁹

Those reviewers who did not make explicit comparison with *The Natural History of Selborne* still praised *Nature Fantasy* for its elegant fusion of art and science, the quality that had raised White’s book to classic status.⁵⁰ Perhaps no reviewer was more effusive than the English poet, rural preservationist and devotee of Gilbert White, HJ Massingham. In a review published in the United States, Massingham placed Chisholm ‘in the front rank of the nature writers ... He is an altogether delightful writer, imaginative in thought and graphic in expression, well versed in literary allusion, individual in colour, style and temper. He shows sympathy with nature’s poetry as well as perception of her secrets’.⁵¹ These reviewers clearly understood that Chisholm’s lyrically romantic style of writing was intended to engage the emotions of his readers and thereby inspire them to protect and preserve the natural world around them. The fact that the book’s natural world centred on the city of Sydney seems to have troubled none of them.

Returning to Sydney after a long absence in Melbourne from 1933 to 1949, Chisholm resumed campaigning for the local urban environment. He fought to preserve bird habitats such as Deewhy Lagoon in a northern Sydney suburb, along with other parks and green places inside the city.⁵² In a 1965 address to the Bankstown Rotary Club, he embellished his

49.SEN., ‘A bird-lover’s book’, *Sydney Mail*, 6 April 1932, 18. See also ‘Books of the week’, *Brisbane Courier*, 9 April 1932, 16.

50.See for example ‘Great Bird Man’, *Brisbane Courier*, 28 May 1932, 12; ‘Current Literature’, *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 9 April 1932, 6.

51.HJM, ‘The City of Riches’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 April 1932, ML, MSS 3540, box 5004. On Massingham, see RJ Moore-Colyer, ‘A Voice Clamouring in the Wilderness: H.J. Massingham (1888-1952) and Rural England’, *Rural History* 13, no.2 (2002): 199-224.

52.Correspondence between AHC and Dom Serventy, 1959, ML, MSS 3540, box 4993;

plea for conservation of the local area with a typical nationalist flourish, telling the assembled Rotarians that they had

a duty to safeguard your national heritage as far as possible. Only then will you be justified in saying with pride, “This is my own, my native land”; and only by so doing, in the spot where Australia was first settled, will you help to restore and preserve the distinctive Spirit of Sydney.⁵³

There was an element of parochialism in this, but in Chisholm’s view, belonging to the imagined domain of the national territory had to be nurtured by attachment to the homely reality of familiar places.

Native and Alien

The anthropologist Nicholas Smith argues that recent environmentalist discourse often conflates the concepts of nature, native and nation. He sees this conflation particularly in the environmentalist urge to restore the national territory (or selected portions of it) to a supposed state of nature by cleansing it of all non-native (aka ‘alien’ or ‘invasive’) species.⁵⁴ This has been a common aspiration of mainstream conservation and environmental bodies in Australia for many decades. Although Chisholm was a nationalist naturalist, he did not share that ambition. His attitudes toward introduced species were more ambivalent. He knew that introduced predators such as cats and foxes wreaked havoc on native species, and that other introduced species competed for resources with native wildlife.⁵⁵ But his love for living things – especially birds – extended across the native–introduced divide, even if his affection for the non-native was more conditional.

AHC, ‘Our Feathered “Tailor”’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 April 1954, 8.

53.AHC, ‘Spirit of Sydney’, notes for address to Bankstown Rotary Club, 12 April 1965, ML, MSS 3540, box 5010.

54.Smith, ‘Blood and Soil’; Nicholas Smith, ‘Thank you mother for the rabbits: Bilbies, bunnies and redemptive ecology’, *Australian Zoologist* 33, no.3 (2006): 369-378. See also Aidan Davison, ‘Unity in Biodiversity? – Reinventing Nation and Nature in Australia’, *Social Alternatives* 29, no.3 (2010): 9-11; David Trigger, Jane Mulcock, Andrea Gaynor & Yann Toussaint, ‘Ecological Restoration, Cultural Preferences and the Negotiation of “Nativeness” in Australia’ *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 1273-1283.

55.See for example AHC to J Marshall, 1 August 1964, ML, MSS 3540, box 4988.

Sometimes, Chisholm seems to have celebrated introduced species, as in his description of hearing, at Botany Bay, ‘a British skylark, Shakespeare’s skylark, singing above the spot where Australia was founded!’ Yet in the same book, *Nature Fantasy*, he commended Sydney’s sandstone country for its inhospitableness to introduced species. ‘It is a point for gratitude’, he observed, ‘that while the sandstone flora affords abundant hospitality to certain native birds it does not appeal to birds introduced from other countries’. Further commentary in this book indicates that while he accepted the presence of sparrows, starlings, goldfinches, skylarks, Indian doves, bulbuls and mynas in Sydney’s parks and suburbs, he was pleased that the surrounding bushlands remained the domain of native species.⁵⁶

Chisholm stated that native birds such as fairy wrens, spinebills and flycatchers were ‘much more welcome’ than English sparrows or Indian doves.⁵⁷ In saying this, however, he was merely expressing a personal preference, not blanket opposition to introduced birds. Similarly, in an *Argus* article on 16 December 1933, he expressed misgivings about a proposal to introduce English game birds into Victoria, although his warnings fell short of outright opposition to bird introductions.⁵⁸ Two weeks later, he advised more strongly against the introduction of game birds, though again without totally opposing introductions.⁵⁹ His position became somewhat clearer in a subsequent article. ‘I deplore this extension of imported birds into the Australian bush’, he wrote; but their presence in big cities he considered more acceptable. Thus he wrote appreciatively on the presence of Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and Indian Mynas in Melbourne, but did not want to see these birds invade adjacent bushland. According to Chisholm, ‘imported birds rob a landscape of its national character’. He wanted to preserve that national character and expressed a preference for native over introduced birds. However, he seems to have considered the big cities so cosmopolitan in nature that the presence of at least some species of introduced birds was

56.AHC, *Nature Fantasy*, 12, 75.

57.AHC, *Nature Fantasy*, p.13.

58.AHC, ‘Importing Birds into Australia’, *Argus*, 16 December 1933, 22.

59.AHC, ‘Bush Notes’, *Australasian*, 30 December 1933, 42.

acceptable there.⁶⁰

In his 1948 book, *News from Nature*, Chisholm was even more appreciative of the introduced species inhabiting Melbourne. The European Goldfinch was ‘a very desirable little bird’, he averred, and he had good words to say about starlings too. He commended Song Thrushes and Blackbirds especially for the quality of their songs and gave no hint that these birds were any less a part of nature because they were introduced. Immediately after extolling the vocal talents of the Superb Lyrebird, he explained that its song and that of the Song Thrush were ‘the most lyrical, most compelling voices of Nature’ in the Melbourne region in Autumn.⁶¹ In similar vein, in a chapter on plants and flowers he encouraged the planting of both Jacaranda trees and scarlet-flowering gums, showing no preference for the native over the introduced species.⁶² Chisholm wanted to ensure the survival of Australia’s native plants and animals – this was essential to his nationalist as well as his naturalist agenda – but he did not consider that ambition subverted by the presence of introduced species in urban areas.

In his more straightforwardly factual writings, Chisholm plainly stated the problems caused by introduced birds. His contribution on ‘Birds, Introduced’ in the 1958 *Australian Encyclopaedia* explained that:

On the whole ... the introducing of birds from other countries to Australia has been injudicious; they have in some instances become an economic problem and, in addition to competing with native birds for food and nesting sites, they have in some degree affected the natural character of the landscape.

He added, however, that some introduced birds ‘undoubtedly are acquisitions from the aesthetic viewpoint’, noting particularly the glorious songs and beautiful plumage of species such as the Eurasian Skylark and European Goldfinch.⁶³ Even in the primly factual pages of

60.AHC, ‘Voices of Three Cities’, *Argus*, 24 March 1934, 9. See also AHC, *Bird Wonders of Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934), 220-227.

61.AHC, *News from Nature*, 85-113.

62.AHC, *News from Nature*, 50-52.

63.AHC, ‘Birds, Introduced’, *The Australian Encyclopaedia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1958), vol.2, 13. Chisholm was Editor-in-Chief of this encyclopaedia; compiling its ten

the encyclopaedia, his love of birds intruded a note of equivocation on the problems of introduced species.

One introduced species for which Chisholm maintained a fondness, though it is much reviled today, was the Common Myna. Under the headline ‘Hustle and Bustle Birds’, he wrote in 1971 that ‘this bird from India is now part of the Australian landscape. And it is not, I suggest, an objectionable feature. It does no economic damage, and its assured strutting, combined with its hearty chatter as it forages for insects and scraps in streets and parklands causes it to be regarded as an entertainer’.⁶⁴ Yet his fondness for the bird was equivocal. A few years earlier, in 1964, he had written on how the bird species inhabiting Sydney had changed over the preceding four decades, lamenting in particular the steep decline of two native species, the Scarlet Honeyeater and Jacky Winter. He noted also the recent and rapid rise in the number of Common Mynas, and asked:

Does this bird merit esteem for its heartiness and self-confidence? I think it does. As a personal preference, however, I would readily exchange a whole batch of mynas, or of any other feathered imports, for a single pair of either of two small natives.

And, to be precise, these two birds are the gentle jacky winter and the lovely scarlet honeyeater, each of which used to express for us, in some measure, the indefinable Spirit of Sydney.⁶⁵

He explicitly made his choice a matter of personal preference, and his criteria were primarily aesthetic rather than ecological. Similar aesthetic judgements informed his less-than-total opposition to the planting of introduced tree species such as radiata pine.⁶⁶

Feelings and Fantasy

As a young man, Chisholm got involved in nature-study programs in schools. What he

volumes took him ten years, from 1948 to 1958.

64.AHC, ‘Hustle and Bustle Birds’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 February 1971, ML, MSS 3540, box 4983.

65.AHC, ‘Sydney Birds Ring Changes’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1964, ML, MSS 3540, box 4983.

66.AHC to V Serventy, 10 November 1972, ML, MSS 3540, box 5012.

emphasised was not science teaching – though he conceded a place for that⁶⁷ – but field studies that would inculcate in students a ‘smiling acquaintance with the good green earth’ and thereby foster a ‘fraternal’ relationship with nature.⁶⁸ Cultivating feelings for nature was for him far more important than teaching the mechanics of biological processes. Although a stickler for factual accuracy, he deplored the cold rationalism he saw in many works of scientific zoology. People had to engage with nature at an emotional as well as an empirical level, he believed, so they could become ‘mates’ with birds and harmonise with the landscapes of their birth.

To further these ends, he wanted to see the evolution of an ‘Australian folk-lore’, centred on nature and fostering both love of this land and care for its flora and fauna. Unlike his Jindyworobak comrades, however, he did not recommend appropriating Aboriginal folklore to this end. In his voluminous writings, he only occasionally commented on Aboriginal Australians, and most of those comments were in the patronisingly appreciative tone common among settler Australians of his generation.⁶⁹ He characterised Aboriginal people as ‘natural conservationists’, and strongly urged the preservation of Aboriginal rock art and other material cultural heritage sites.⁷⁰ As editor of the 1958 *Australian Encyclopaedia*, he ensured that Aboriginal issues received extensive coverage. In fact, the entry for ‘Aborigines’ was the longest in the entire ten volumes.⁷¹ But he never suggested, as the Jindyworobaks did, that Aboriginal lore and tradition should be assimilated into the national culture.

67.Chisholm was much less enthusiastic about science education than fellow popular naturalist, Crosbie Morrison; see Libby Robin, ‘The Professor and the Journalist: Science in Popular Conservation Campaigns’, *Victorian Historical Journal* 65, no.2 (1994): 154-168. Perhaps this reflected the fact that Morrison had a university degree (MSc in Marine Zoology) whereas Chisholm was largely self-educated.

68.AHC, ‘Know your own land’.

69.Russell McGregor, *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011).

70.AHC, ‘If it’s valuable, kill it’, *Australian International News Review*, 14 May 1965, 22, ML, MSS 3540, box 5009; AHC, ‘Can the Aboriginal art galleries be saved?’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 April 1964, ML, MSS 3540, box 4971.

71.AHC (Editor-in-Chief), *The Australian Encyclopaedia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1958), vol.1, 5-106.

Instead, Chisholm coopted the folklore of his own Celtic heritage, of which he was immensely proud. His nature writings were liberally peppered with words such as ‘elfin’, ‘faery’, ‘pixies’, ‘magic’ and so forth. In the aptly named *Nature Fantasy*, he even invented a verb, ‘fairied’, to describe the flight of a Southern Emu-wren through tangled heaths.⁷² ‘Fantasy!’, he exclaimed, was a ‘beautiful word’,⁷³ and he had frequent recourse to both the word and the imaginative process it denoted. Many of his writings were lushly romantic, littered with literary allusions and bits of quoted verse. Those that were more restrained still revelled in imaginative responses to the natural world, including imagining the world from a bird’s perspective.

More than that, Chisholm frequently indulged in anthropomorphism. When he described lyrebirds as artists, bowerbirds as aesthetes and magpies as having qualities of ‘cheerfulness, courage, and originality’,⁷⁴ he was not merely playing with metaphors. He firmly believed that birds possessed human-like attributes: that lyrebirds’ song and dance were expressions of self-conscious artistry; that bowerbirds possessed a well-developed aesthetic sense; that birds possessed some capacity to think; that they engaged in play not usually for practical purposes but in sheer ‘zest of life’; and that a great deal of bird behaviour was animated by *joie de vivre*.⁷⁵ Throughout his life, he never retreated from this position on the artistry, intelligence and emotionality of birds, despite the efforts of scientist friends to dissuade him from what one of them, Professor Jock Marshall, derided as ‘anthropomorphic nonsense’.⁷⁶

72.AHC, *Nature Fantasy*, 135.

73.AHC, ‘Naming the book’.

74.AHC, *Mateship with Birds*, 164.

75.See for example AHC, *Bird Wonders*; AHC, *Birds and Green Places*, 138-140, 162-166; AHC, ‘When Birds Play’, *Argus*, 14 July 1934, 10; AHC, ‘The World’s Most Cultured Birds’, *Australia To-day*, November 1933, ML, MSS 3540, box 4976; AHC, ‘Abstract Artists in Birdland’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 1968, ML, MSS 3540, box 4976.

76.J Marshall to AHC, 15 March 1951, ML, MSS 3540, box 4988; J Marshall, ‘Bower-birds’, *Australian Natural History* 14, no.2 (June 1962): 57-58.

In Chisholm's view, it was the scientists' poverty of imagination that was at fault.⁷⁷ He vigorously protested

against the matter-of-fact viewpoint that persists in limiting all bird-motives to a utilitarian basis.... I plead for recognition of *joie de vivre* as a vital influence in the motives and actions of birds. Nay, I assert on the evidence of sunlit experience that the expression of joy in life is the third most potent influence in the lives of Nature's chief troubadours, giving place only to, and frequently being collateral with, the urge to feed and to mate.⁷⁸

Reducing the motives for bird behaviour to reproduction and survival was symptomatic of scientists' 'shallow thinking', their refusal to grant non-human creatures qualities other than bestial. After extolling the artistry of vocal mimics such as lyrebirds, bowerbirds and orioles, he asked: 'What right have we to presume that man is the only creature on earth that loves to play with "sounds and sweet airs?"'.⁷⁹

Avian vocal mimicry was among Chisholm's special areas of expertise, though his scientific friends strongly disputed his explanations for the phenomenon. In a lengthy article on the topic in the *Ibis*, the journal of the British Ornithologists' Union, he argued that mimicry served little practical purpose, but rather comprised 'for the most part expressions of pure *joie de vivre*, the mockers indicating their sensitiveness to compelling sounds, their appreciation of such sounds, and their general high vitality'.⁸⁰ Writing about the master-mimics, lyrebirds, he explained that:

On the whole, then, the truth appears to be that mimicry has no real utility at all, but is simply a happy exercise prompted by talent, temperament, and environment....

In short, the lyre-tailed maestro of Australia indulges in mimicry purely as a hobby.

77.AHC to J Walsh, 13 July 1962, ML, MSS 3540, box 4976; AHC, 'Bush "Art" and Courtship: New Study of Bower-birds' [review of J Marshall's *Bower-birds*], *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 1955, ML, MSS 3540, box 4976.

78.AHC, *Birds and Green Places*, 164-165.

79.AHC, *Bird Wonders*, 188-189, 219.

80.AHC, 'Vocal Mimicry among Australian Birds', *Ibis* 74, no.4 (1932): 609. See also AHC, *Bird Wonders*, 210-219.

His natural notes doubtless are used, in the courting season at least, largely on a practical basis, but his imitations are simply vocal ornaments – the playthings of an artist who glories in his own power.⁸¹

His adherence to such ‘unscientific’ notions may have been partly an outcome of Chisholm’s lack of formal education, but the frequency and fulsomeness of his anthropomorphising suggest that he was deliberately seeking to encourage his readers to emotionally connect with birds, and ultimately with the natural world as a whole.

Chisholm’s life-long interest in vernacular bird names was also driven, to a large extent, by his belief that euphonious names fostered good relations. ‘We seem to like best those birds which have been given homely and pleasant titles’, he claimed, for thereby ‘they become, as it were, members of our family, and we speak of them as we do of close friends’.⁸² This was an instance of the intimacy with birds he tried consistently to cultivate. Names were important because they provided an interface between nature and humanity, and displeasing names disrupted that relationship. ‘Indeed, it is doubtful’, he argued, ‘if any bird can fairly sing its way into the hearts of the people under the handicap of a heavy name’.⁸³ He acknowledged that this was seeing things ‘from the human standpoint’, but Chisholm never resiled from the assumption that the human standpoint was what counted for most in the conservationist cause.

Convinced of the importance of bird names, he chaired for five decades the Vernacular Names Committee of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists’ Union, in which role he did his best to replace such disparaging names as ‘Warty-faced’ and ‘Thickhead’ with more complimentary titles like ‘Regent’ and ‘Whistler’. So important were bird names that Chisholm could get extraordinarily agitated over them.⁸⁴ This may at first seem eccentric, but

81.AHC, *The Romance of the Lyrebird* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1960) 113.

82.AHC, ‘Can we improve our bird names’, *Gould League Notes*, 1953, 16, ML, MSS 3540, box 5010.

83.AHC, *Feathered Minstrels of Australia* (Sydney: Simmons Ltd, 1926).

84.See for example AHC to Jim Bravery, 6 May 1968, ML, MSS 3540, box 5000; plus other correspondence and clippings in this file.

it was consistent with the emphasis he placed on elevating mateship with nature into an intrinsic component of the national identity. In his book *Mateship with Birds*, he maintained that ‘easy, graceful vernaculars for our Australian birds’ would facilitate their inclusion in the national literature.⁸⁵ Or as he put it elsewhere, we need ‘melodious names’ for our birds ‘so that our poets may assist the birds to sing their way into the heart of the nation’.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Delivering the eulogy at his funeral on 13 July 1977, Vince Serventy explained that Chisholm had lived through more than eight decades ‘of vast political and social changes’. Among the many transformations, ‘Perhaps the most important was the change in the old feelings of Australians, as being aliens in this land, with home as far-off England. Today most of us regard Australia as home. In this change of attitude Alec Chisholm played a major part’.⁸⁷ The subject of the eulogy would have been mightily pleased, for convincing the Australian people to identify with the natural world around them had been his paramount objective throughout his adult life.

Chisholm’s entire output of popular natural history writings can be seen as an attempt to foster in the public an emotional intimacy with Australian nature. Through such intimacy, people would come to value the plants, animals and landscapes of this country, seek to conserve them and make them intrinsic to their national identity. As the Australian environmental scientist and historian George Seddon has observed, ‘intimacy, knowledge, love, the attributing of value are the foundation of all real conservation.’⁸⁸ Chisholm, a self-described ‘bush naturalist’,⁸⁹ understood this decades before Seddon wrote it. The place-centred nationalism he tried to cultivate would grow out of that intimacy, he hoped, for

85.AHC, *Mateship with Birds*, 81-82.

86.AHC, ‘Good neighbours’, 35.

87.V Serventy, text of funeral oration for Alec Chisholm, 13 July 1977, ML, Acquisitions Files for MSS 3540.

88.George Seddon, *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 26.

89.AHC, *Joy of the Earth*, 9.

the mutual benefit of people and their non-human compatriots.

Chisholm's conservation rested as much – if not more – on aesthetic as on ecological considerations. It was a conservation founded on the human need to commune with nature, rather than on the notion that nature comprised a self-sufficient system at risk of breakdown from human interference. The dualism of nature and humanity, or nature and culture, identified in recent environmentalist discourses by a range of scholars,⁹⁰ was alien to Chisholm's thinking. His anthropomorphism blurred any such divide, for by attributing birds with artistry, aesthetic sensibilities and *joie de vivre*, he was effectively imbuing them with cultural traits. In similar vein, by depicting the proper relationship between humans and other species as 'mateship' and 'fraternal' affection, he was drawing nature into the sphere of culture. Beyond that, he seems to have understood that nature was not just what was 'out there' in the real world. It was also what was inside people's heads – their perceptions, passions and predilections.

90.A Davison, 'The Trouble with Nature: Ambivalence in the lives of urban Australian environmentalists', *Geoforum*, 39 (2008): 1284-1295.