

Who was Caroline Chisholm?



Have you ever wondered about the woman on the old five dollar note? For 30 years she helped Australian immigrants. Her name - Caroline Chisholm and she was known as the immigrants' friend. What was she like? Here's what the Governor of NSW had to say about her:

"I expected to have seen an old lady in white cap and spectacles, who would have talked to me about my soul. I was amazed when my aide introduced a handsome stately young woman who proceeded to reason..as if she thought her reason and experience were worth as much as mine." The plight of the immigrant girls who arrived in Sydney under the government's bounty system with little or no money, who wandered the streets during the day and at night huddled together in crevices or holes in rocks, trouble her immensely, and she had up to nine girls at a time in her own small home while finding employment for them with friends. Other people had offered help, but only if she had the governor's approval for her plan to provide shelter for the girls.

The Governor finally agreed after her third visit to let her use a government building and she trusted God would provide for their food and clothing. She soon had 94 women in the home and opened a job registry. She found work for some of the girls in Sydney, but she took the rest of the girls to the country. Often where she knew there was an eligible bachelor, she would place a capable girl with the nearest neighbours. This resulted in numerous marriages. But why did she care enough to do something when so many others did not? The answer lies in her background. She was born in 1808 into a prosperous evangelical Christian farming family and the influence on her family of William Wilberforce and his social action was strong.

When she was 7 years old a soldier recuperating from his injuries came to live with them and he captured the little girl's heart with his stories of the battles and hardships of emigrants to Britain's colonies, as well as tales of the tremendous potential for those emigrants who worked hard, to make a much better life for themselves than they ever could have done in Britain. From then on Caroline's favourite game was 'Immigrants' with boats she made out of broad beans and her pocket money went on little dolls who emigrated to far off lands. Her mother was not amused one day when she spilt the ocean right through her bed and from then she played the game in the coal cellar by candlelight.

As a young woman she had several young men propose to her, but she made it clear that she would only marry someone if she was free to carry out what she felt was her God given calling to help the poor. Captain Chisholm, an Army Officer agreed to this. He was a Roman Catholic and about the time of her marriage she converted to Roman Catholicism. When they arrived in Sydney with their two little boys in 1838 she was 30 years.

Caroline Chisholm did her utmost to encourage family life and by protecting the immigrant women, she gave them the opportunity to become valuable colonists. She helped all regardless of religious affiliation and she did this in spite of the fact that it was improper for a woman in those times to be involved in the public arena. To her contemporaries Caroline Chisholm was an inspiration, even Florence Nightingale declared that she was Mrs Chisholm's friend and pupil.