

Book Launch

Stan Scott, *Chis: The Life and Work of Alan Rowland Chisholm (1888–1981)*, foreword by Wallace Kirsop, Melbourne, The Ancora Press/Monash University, November 2019, 238 pp., rrp AU\$ 40.00, ISBN 978-0-64811-898-5.

On 27 November 2019 Stan Scott's long-awaited biography of A. R. Chisholm was launched in the Leigh Scott Room at the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. The event was hosted by Professor Russell Goulburn (Dean of the Faculty of Arts), the French Studies Program in the School of Languages and Linguistics and the French Trust Fund of the University of Melbourne.

Stan Scott (1927–2014) was Chisholm's colleague and disciple at the University of Melbourne from the mid-1950s until his retirement in 1984. A gifted linguist and a great lover of nature, he was loved for his principled approach to learning and his quirky sense of humour. Scott's biography of Chisholm has its own history, which is not without passion and even scandal. Thanks to the University of Melbourne Archives, it was preserved after his death, and was made available for the current publication.

The editor of the biography, Wallace Kirsop, is an Adjunct Professor at Monash University and an Honorary Fellow of the Baillieu Library. Long-time editor of *The Australian Journal of French Studies* and co-founder of the French Australian journal *Explorations*, (now *The French Australian Review*) he is renowned as a scholar of early modern French culture and of the History of the Book. He is also one of Australia's most eminent book collectors.

ISFAR member and Editorial Consultant for *The French Australian Review*, Dr Patricia Clancy was the guest speaker at the launch. She was for many years a key member of the French Department at the University of Melbourne, where she was a colleague of Stan Scott. Dr Clancy has been awarded national and international prizes for her translations which include Simon Leys' *The Death of Napoleon*, several works by Jean-Paul Kauffmann and *The French Consul's Wife*, the memoirs of Celeste, the Comtesse de Chabrilan.



Professor Chisholm.

Following is a transcript of Dr Patricia Clancy's speech:

When I was asked to be part of the launch of Stan Scott's long-awaited biography of Professor Chisholm, or 'Chis', as most people called him amongst themselves, it occurred to me that the main criterion was to find someone who had been both a student of Professor Chisholm and a colleague of Stan Scott in the French Department of Melbourne University. I seem to be the last man standing, and I only just qualify as a student of the Chisholm era: I was probably his last research student. He supervised my MA thesis in 1956 and retired the following year. I therefore knew him right at the end of his long teaching career. (Those few of his students still remaining are at least in their mid-eighties.) Stan was a colleague for twenty-four years before he took early retirement. Whatever the reasons for my being here, it's a privilege to be asked to speak about them both.

Both Stan Scott and Professor Chisholm were modest men who never made any show of their erudition or achievements, so much so in Stan's case that I only realised little by little, by chance remarks in his conversation, how wide-ranging his interests, research and publications were. Within the Department he had a rather quiet demeanour but with a wry sense of humour. He kept his private life to himself. As often happens, it is only at the funeral that we are given the full picture of who that person was and what he had accomplished. Stan died in 2014. In a moving eulogy, his nephew Peter Mackie referred to the relationship with Chisholm as being the most significant influence on Stan's academic and personal life. They were both great linguists and profound philosophical thinkers.

Stan and Chisholm had a great deal in common. Firstly, their love of languages and their classical background. To my knowledge, in addition to Latin, Greek, French and Italian, Stan also knew one or two European dialects, Sanskrit and probably more. Chisholm was as learned in German language and literature as he was in French and also knew Italian, Spanish, Danish, Scots Gaelic, Arabic and some Russian. To quote Stan's book, 'philology, in the broad sense of the word, was simply a deep and invincible passion'. Chisholm had an abiding love of Latin and his mastery of the language earned him an invitation from the Vatican to write an article in Latin for one of their publications.

Stan and Chis were of like mind, literally and metaphorically, conservative in the sense that they upheld those intellectual values of scholarship in university education that they respected and represented. Chisholm usually used persuasion and enthusiasm whereas Stan was inclined to take more direct action and was tenacious in his efforts. An example of this, which is not in the book, concerns the introduction of the audio-lingual method of language learning being trialled in schools by the Victorian University and Schools Examination Board. Now stored in the Archives, there are letters, talks and articles by Stan Scott and another colleague, Frank Just, between 1963 and 1974, expressing their strong opposition to the use of audio-visual equipment as a principal instrument in a structuralist-behaviourist teaching method. They were supported by Professor Chisholm and others from the beginning. In a letter Chisholm congratulates Stan and Frank on their challenge to what he calls 'the laboratory' business: their job was to 'train minds not to provide polyglot

waiters for restaurants'. Chis was obviously much more forthright there than he was in public. However, he did realise much later that the end of an era, his era, was approaching. Stan actively resisted it and took early retirement in 1984 when he decided that he could no longer support the direction teaching was taking in the French Department and the Arts Faculty in general.

Once again, like his mentor, Stan was as intellectually active in retirement as he was in his university career. This book would have been his major undertaking before he retired. He began it straight after Chis died in 1981, having access to all his papers, government records and the goodwill of family members, friends and former students. The manuscript was offered to Melbourne University Press in 1983, but as no progress had been made after nine months, Stan withdrew it. Wallace Kirsop will talk about its long journey to publication twenty-six years later.



Until Stan Scott's biography, *Chis: The Life and Work of Alan Rowland Chisholm*, very little was generally known about Professor Chisholm's background and family. We knew that he had a wife who was ill and a daughter, Mimi. Apart from Stan and perhaps a few privileged others, our generation of students at least never saw them. Stan's biography reveals many of the private thoughts of the man behind the academic. The tragedy in his life was the mental and often physical illness of his second wife, Lillian. She was always cared for at home by Mimi, who continued to live there. It was a constant worry to Chisholm. Contrary to what one may imagine, there were money worries as well. His university salary was not generous, and was no better when he retired. He then accepted the offer from *The Age* to write articles for its literary pages, usually on contemporary Australian poets, whom he championed, in order to supplement his income, especially as Lillian's health was declining.

Chisholm called his student years at Sydney University 'a spiritual sanctuary'. There he gained a thorough linguistic knowledge from the rigorous Professor Nicholson. The unimaginative approach to French Literature was disappointing, but he always agreed that without it any literary study 'could only be superficial and pretentious'. He also studied philosophy, especially metaphysics, which always underpinned his approach to literature.

It was at Sydney University that Chisholm met Randolph Hughes and Christopher Brennan. The three of them were outstanding scholars and extraordinarily creative intellects. Hughes became Chisholm's closest friend and confidant. They both wrote poetry and had great admiration for Brennan, who was later the subject of Chisholm's continued research and publication. Brennan as a scholar and poet had a great influence on Chisholm and inspired his love of Mallarmé and the French Symbolists, which became his greatest contribution to literary studies. Stan quotes the chapter on Hughes in Chisholm's book *Men were my Milestones*, where Chisholm expressed for the first time his concept of true scholarship.

At an early age I was convinced, and often discussed my conviction with Hughes, that scholarship fulfils itself only when it becomes creative. It entails meticulous care for details and a strict attention to accuracy, but if it goes no further than that it is apt to be mere erudition, pedantic and sterile. True scholarship is a starting point rather than a goal in itself. A true scholar is remembered not simply for his details, but for the scope and sweep and creative imagination that characterize his work.

In 1912 Chisholm left on a scholarship to do postgraduate studies in France and Germany, obliging him to take an extremely intensive course to learn German, which he enjoyed tremendously. Study was enlivened by concerts and visits to the theatre. Music and poetry were always associated in his work, in German Romanticism as well as French Symbolism.

Despite his small stature, Chisholm served 3½ years in the First World War, beginning in the Signals School in France, where he was soon made an instructor. As Stan Scott comments, 'even on active service he was fated to teach'. In Normandy and Belgium, he then served as an interpreter. Chisholm's letters and notebooks show him always on the move, but never without French or German books, including many captured from German posts. Whenever there was a quiet time, he was able to escape into his own private world, a gift he had all his life and which served him well in difficult times.

On his return to Melbourne in April 1918, Chisholm went back briefly to teach at the Sydney Teachers' College, where he had also been a student during his Arts course, before taking up the post of lecturer in charge of the French Department at Melbourne University. From the beginning there

were changes he was eager to make. Stan points out that ‘Chisholm was not so much a revolutionary ... at least not consciously, as a temperate, tactful and constructive reformer’. He wanted to lessen the ‘tyranny of grammar’ and the emphasis on facts and literary history, which he saw as a means to end and not an end in itself. He also wanted to introduce more modern French literature to the syllabus and bring more emphasis on what he called ‘appreciation’.

A student in that first year, who later became a distinguished diplomat, expressed what many others also recalled. ‘In every direction he opened up something new.’ ‘There was a quality of excitement in the air. Soon he was organising a dramatic club... There were nights in the “gods” at the theatres with conversation confined to French and all kinds of informal exchanges.’ Chisholm’s enthusiasm was very infectious.

At the same time, he confessed that he was being ‘more and more drawn to Symbolism, the inner meaning of which I am only just beginning to see’. Poetry was then and always accompanied by philosophical, especially metaphysical ideas, informed especially by Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Spengler. Chisholm still read widely and in 1927 wrote a very original, perceptive analysis of Proust who, at that time, was still a new author. In addition to a very heavy workload, he took time to pursue numerous extra-curricular activities, mostly related to French.

The 1930s were extremely productive, beginning in 1930 with a book, *The Art of Arthur Rimbaud*. MUP published *Towards Hérodiade: A Literary Genealogy* in 1934. It was very successful in Australia and overseas, especially in Europe and America. There were books and articles on Brennan as well as Mallarmé, Valéry and Symbolism, some of the latter in French publications. In Paris Chisholm met Valéry, who was delighted with his commentary on *La Jeune Parque*. He also corresponded with eminent overseas scholars and critics. At the same time, he was teaching a wide range of subjects both in language and literature.

When war broke out again in 1939, Chisholm wrote articles in the *Argus*, the *Australasian* and the *Courrier australien* and gave public lectures to support France, as he said, ‘for the purpose of strengthening the morale of French people in Victoria and their pro-French friends’. Then, in 1943 Lillian had a breakdown. He wrote to Hughes, ‘I just shouldered the burden’.

As the University courses and numbers expanded, so did Professor Chisholm's work load, but it was during these difficult years that his international reputation grew, strengthened by major publications on Symbolism by his most distinguished pupils, Gardner Davies, Lloyd Austin and James Lawler. A review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in October 1954 was the first to refer to 'the brilliant results achieved by the more rigorous and more sensitive methods of the "Australian School" of critics...'. There followed similar recognition in the *Cahiers du Sud* in 1956 and the *Modern Language Review* in 1963. Eminent French and Italian critics then began to call it the 'Melbourne School'. Stan reports the ultimate accolade came when Chisholm was told that 'Valéry had expressed great pleasure in the knowledge that he was understood—in the antipodes!'

Chisholm's influence was not restricted to Symbolist poetics. He also had research students in mediaeval, nineteenth and twentieth-century literature. Stan remarks that he imbued them, and I quote, 'with his sense of exegetical rigour and, perhaps especially, with an even deeper sense of the human metaphysical mysteries that remain long after the mere letter has been elucidated'. In the French Department, Monsieur Karagheusian, the colourful Armenian lecturer appointed by Chisholm, liked to call us, 'the Chisholm breed'.

Many honours, both academic and civil, were conferred on Chisholm here and in France in the years leading up to his long-awaited retirement in 1956. However, if anything, Stan calculates that now having the uninterrupted time to devote himself to his studies and publications, that 'the years of retirement yielded approximately three times the literary output of his years in office'. Chisholm died in 1981 aged 93, thinking and jotting down ideas to the last.

We, his students, were very privileged to be taught by Chis. There are two memories of Professor Chisholm that we all share. The first is listening to his lectures on the Symbolist poets. He would take a poem, say by Mallarmé, which seemed almost cryptic and, through brilliant close textual analysis, reveal the deep layers of the poem, its unique significance, structure and music. Even if you were not particularly drawn to poetry, you had to admire his extraordinary insight and enthusiasm.

The second memory is of Chis's occasional lectures, open to everyone. I think they were called extension lectures, and the one I remember most was entitled 'Animus and Anima'. The theatre would be full and the small, rather wizened figure with large glasses hardly seemed to reach the top of the lectern. Nothing really prepared a young undergraduate for Chis's mind-expanding explorations of a subject through literature, philosophy and psychology, including writers and ideas ancient and modern. At the end of the hour, all the threads would be drawn together in a thought-provoking conclusion. You sat there thinking, 'This is what I came to the University to hear'. Chis's lectures were perfect examples of 'the scope and sweep and creative imagination' that he himself had described as characterizing true scholarship.

This short account of Chis can only give a glimpse of the scholarship, the quality of writing and the wealth of detailed research that bring the man and his work to life in Stan Scott's biography. In the preface Stan, admitting his admiration and close friendship with Chisholm, states that 'in the interests of objectivity and detachment, there is in what follows a fairly strict adherence to documents and sources'. At the end of the book, however, Stan Scott has provided more than enough evidence to call Alan Rowland Chisholm 'one of the finest literary scholars of our time'.

