

Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia
An exhibition developed and presented by the
National Museum of Australia

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Ben Chifley's Chair

Dubbed 'The Man of the People', Joseph Benedict Chifley is well known and regarded as Australia's 16th Prime Minister. Much lesser known is the personal trial that he, a Catholic, endured throughout his adult life as a result of his 1914 marriage to Elizabeth McKenzie, a staunch Presbyterian. Around that time (between the 1890s and 1960s), this type of union made up a fifth of all Australian marriages and was somewhat derisively known as a 'mixed marriage'¹ – a term that today brings to mind a union between individuals of different ethnic, rather than religious, backgrounds. Yet this disparity is not as clear cut as it may appear, with religious identity in pre-multicultural Australia very closely and conspicuously tied to ethnicity and even political leanings.

In this system, 'Catholic' was understood to mean Irish and anti-Establishment, while 'Protestant' stood for English and loyalty to the British Empire. The religious dichotomy was hence primarily a reflection of these long-standing tensions that existed between the two countries since England's colonial oppression of Ireland – long before the First Fleet arrived on Australian shores. However, extensive migration from both camps transplanted these sociopolitical prejudices and grievances from the 'old' countries to Australia, where they were nourished by both sides and soon took root. Making up as much as about a quarter of this early migrational flow, the Irish nonetheless became Australia's ethnic minority and suffered the discrimination and oppression that so often befalls disadvantaged groups. Ben Chifley's mother and paternal grandparents were all Irish migrants and the future Prime Minister grew up quite poor and thoroughly Catholic as part of this Australian underclass.

Ben met his future wife in 1912 and they were married two years later.



A chair used by Prime Minister Ben Chifley in church in the 1940s is on display at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in the exhibition *Not Just Ned: a true history of the Irish in Australia*. 'Chif's Chair' is on loan from St Christopher's Cathedral, Canberra.

However, their union presented a problem that required the couple to make a difficult decision. Namely, with Elizabeth coming from a financially better off family of Calvinist Scots, they sat on opposite sides of the pseudo religious divide. In order to marry across it meant one of them had to marry 'out' of their Church and Ben - a privately religious man whose devotional zeal fell short of his wife's - took on this burden. He later explained that - 'One of us had to take the knock. It had better be me.'

When Ben took his vows at their modest June wedding in a Presbyterian Church in the Sydney suburb of Glebe, he defied the Papal decree, *ne temere*, which forbade Catholics from marrying outside the Church and had come into effect only six years earlier. As a result, while both Ben and Elizabeth continued to regularly worship in their separate churches, Ben was no longer allowed to take communion at mass and ceased to see himself as a full member of the Catholic Church. When worshipping at the local church in his hometown of Bathurst, which he continued to call home throughout his federal career, Ben often simply stood at the back of the church. When in Canberra fulfilling his parliamentary duties, he would attend mass at St Christopher's Catholic Church (now St Christopher's Cathedral), where he also remained at the back, yet in the relative comfort of a simple, wooden chair that came to be affectionately known as 'Chif's Chair'.

Such life-long indignities, as well as the very discrete nature of Ben and Elizabeth's wedding - evidenced by the lack of photographs from their special day - are symptomatic of the experiences of many Australians who entered into a 'mixed marriage' before the development of multiculturalism in the 1970s. In comparison to many of these other couples, however, the Chifleys may be seen to have been spared much of the pain that befell other 'mixed marriages' at the hands of one - and sometimes both - of the spouse's intolerant families.

The McKenzie's wedding present to their daughter and her bridegroom, for example, was tenancy of a modest house in Bathurst, which became the couple's only married home for the remainder of their lives. Meanwhile, many other couples were tormented by their families in punishment for entering into a 'mixed marriage', with Catholics and Presbyterians alike cut out of wills, refused contact by their families, banished from the family home, and even spurned from parents' deathbed visits. Also, while Ben and Elizabeth had not been able to have children, many mixed-religion couples who did find that the blessing of children also brought with it its own set of challenges, with questions of which religion the children were to be raised in often bringing to the fore parents' divided loyalties and leading to further familial friction.

When Ben Chifley died in Canberra in 1951, his State Funeral in Bathurst was claimed by the Catholic Church. Organised by the town's Roman Catholic Bishop and drawing messages from Roman Catholic dignitaries such as Archbishop Mannix - the funeral gave comfort to his

Catholic relatives and friends, who had no doubt hoped for a more respectful resting place for Ben than that afforded to him at weekly mass.

'Chif's Chair', a touching symbol of the estrangement affected by Australian society and religious establishments on those who chose to marry outside their Church, features in the National Museum of Australia exhibition, *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia*.

References:

Siobhan McHugh, "Not in Front of the Alter: Mixed Marriages and Sectarian tensions between Catholics and Protestants in Pre-Multicultural Australia", *History Australia*, Vol 6, No 2, 2009.

Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia is on show at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra from 17 March-31 July 2011. Admission charges apply.

For more information about the exhibition visit www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/irish_in_australia

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