

# Richards, Eulalia Statira (Sisley) (1878–1956)

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Dr. Eulalia Richards

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Eulalia Richards, M.D., was a pioneering medical doctor who contributed to the health ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia and beyond as a public speaker and writer on medical, temperance, and well-being issues particularly to do with women's and children's health.

## Birth and Family Life

Dr. Richards was born Eulalia Statira Sisley in Battle Creek, Michigan, on August 22, 1878.<sup>1</sup> Her parents, William Conqueror and Frederika (House) Sisley, were Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) converts and missionaries who pioneered in educational, medical, and publishing institutions in South Africa, Australia, and England before retiring in Nashville, Tennessee, in the United States of America.<sup>2</sup> Eulalia's aunts were also notable converts to Adventism. They included Ellen "Nellie" (Sisley) Starr, whose husband, George, became chaplain at the Sydney Sanitarium,<sup>3</sup> and Mary "Maud" (Sisley) Boyd, who was widely acknowledged as the first single woman SDA missionary.<sup>4</sup>

Eulalia grew up with her sisters, Alice and Susie, in Battle Creek, where her mother was the secretary-treasurer of the Review and Herald Publishing Association and taught at Battle Creek College, while her father, an

architect, managed the publishing company.<sup>5</sup> Showing intellectual ability from a young age, Eulalia enrolled in a four-year medical degree program at the American Medical Missionary College in Battle Creek under the presidency of J. H. Kellogg. She graduated as a physician in 1902—1 of 11 women in a class of 24 students.<sup>6</sup> The following year, Eulalia began her work as a medical missionary. She lectured throughout the British Union in 1903 and was the resident physician at the Leicester Sanitarium from 1904 to 1906.<sup>7</sup> In 1905, Eulalia married Dr. Franklin Richards, also a physician, and their first child, John William, was born later that year. The Richardses traveled to Australia in 1906.<sup>8</sup>

## Education and Medical Work

In 1904, Dr. Eulalia Richards was the first graduate from the American Medical Missionary College to sit for a triple qualification, including the Licentiate Royal College of Physicians (L.R.C.P.) examination, in Glasgow. She later wrote:

Our school was not recognised abroad, and my case was made a test. I was not eligible to sit for the examination but I believe in answer to prayer, permission was granted for me to take the examination with the understanding that if I failed no other graduate would be committed to try from our school, that if I pass the examination, others would be received without question. After 10 weeks' study in Edinburgh I sat for the examination, and by God's blessing passed successfully, thus opening the door for other students from our school to follow.<sup>9</sup>

Later that year Dr. Richards became a founding member and secretary of the Leicester Good Health League,<sup>10</sup> which met at the Leicester Sanitarium where she was a resident physician.<sup>11</sup> At this time, Dr. Richards also began to contribute regularly to the *Good Health* magazine on medical matters.<sup>12</sup>

The Richards family moved to Australia in 1907, arriving in Adelaide on the steamer *Persic* on January 31, and traveling on to arrive in Sydney, New South Wales, on February 8.<sup>13</sup> After the birth of their second child, Franklinna, called "Bobbie," on March 4, 1907, Eulalia joined her husband, the medical superintendent, to replace another husband-wife team, Daniel and Laretta Kress, as resident physicians at the Sydney Sanitarium.<sup>14</sup> With a small staff, including Alfred Semmens as manager and Emma Semmens as medical matron, the doctors Richards worked toward building the patient base to 40—which historian Milton Hook notes was the estimated number required to balance the budget. This was achieved in 1911.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to their medical work, Franklin and Eulalia both engaged with their local community and beyond. Eulalia was a gifted public speaker and initially gave lectures at venues including the Sanitarium Café in Hunter Street, which drew considerable interest.<sup>16</sup> Soon she was invited to speak at camp meetings around the country and in New Zealand,<sup>17</sup> promoting temperance and healthful living and on women's and girls' issues in particular.

<sup>18</sup> A hallmark of Dr. Richards's lectures was the practical nature of her advice and the applicability of the content.

She often spoke to large audiences, some of which comprised a large number of community members not previously connected with the Church. On such occasions, it was not unusual for the doctor to hold consultations with audience members.<sup>19</sup> Both Eulalia and Franklin also gave special lectures on healthful living at Avondale School for Christian Workers, later Avondale College, from 1909.<sup>20</sup> During this time Eulalia continued to write, contributing a series of practical lessons in home nursing to the *Australasian Health Magazine*.<sup>21</sup> In late 1911, she took John and Franklinna on an extended holiday to England, returning after a seven-month absence in May of the following year.<sup>22</sup>

In October 1913, the doctors Richards completed their term at the Sydney Sanitarium and moved to 141 Macquarie Street, Sydney, where they opened their own medical practice.<sup>23</sup> Despite this change to private practice, Eulalia continued her demanding schedule of writing and giving public lectures. Together Franklin and Eulalia wrote a large medical book, the *Ladies' Handbook of Home Treatment*. A huge undertaking, the 787-page illustrated book was published by the Signs Publishing Company in 1917. At this time Eulalia was still contributing regular articles to the magazine *Life and Health* as well as a column entitled "A Mother's Talk with Mothers."<sup>24</sup> Her third child, Wilfred, called "Billie," was born on December 10, 1917.

Eulalia took two trips to the United States, one in 1920 and one in 1925, the latter to celebrate her parents' golden wedding anniversary.<sup>25</sup> Following a series of events upon her return, Eulalia and Franklin separated, and she was granted a divorce in 1927 on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness. Eulalia returned to the Sydney Sanitarium to replace doctors on furlough and remained there for two years.<sup>26</sup> Dr. Richards also joined the Health Department at the Australasian Union at that time. As Lester Devine notes, she "travelled extensively throughout Australia lecturing on health issues and attending camp meetings as well as being on the staff of the Sydney Adventist Hospital."<sup>27</sup> Dr. Richards was called to work at the Warburton Sanitarium (known as "the Hydro") in 1928, where she remained for two years before taking up postgraduate work in the United States for a year.<sup>28</sup> The Sydney Sanitarium was struggling under financial strains when Dr. Richards returned in 1931; nevertheless, under the policy of the Australasian Union Conference, Eulalia was granted leave to pursue further postgraduate work in London, England. Thus, she remained in Sydney only briefly before sailing for England on the *Barrabool*, and she remained in London for a year.<sup>29</sup>

Dr. Richards returned in 1933 after visiting her family in the United States and in 1934 was gifted with a visitor of her own in Wahroonga: her aunt, Maud Sisley Boyd. Mrs. Boyd had previously been preceptor, matron, and teacher at the Australasian Missionary College following her pioneering mission work in Switzerland in 1877 and Africa in 1887; thus, she found a warm reception.<sup>30</sup> The visit was likely in response to the deaths of Dr. Richards's mother and aunt in quick succession earlier that year.<sup>31</sup>

Over the next 10 years, Dr. Richards continued her medical ministry as an anesthetist and obstetrician at the Sydney Adventist Hospital, as well as teaching in the School of Nursing. Her positive attitude and warmth were evident to patients, colleagues, and students alike, evidenced during one graduation ceremony, where Dr.

Richards's advice regarding "the importance of a sense of humour in dealing with the sick" was reportedly put into practice by her students in an amusing exchange between the classes.<sup>32</sup> Much time was also devoted to revising the 1917 edition of the "Ladies Handbook," as her book had come to be known. The volume was republished, again by the Signs Publishing Company, with 1038 pages in the hardcover edition in 1946.<sup>33</sup> R. H. Parr observed,

For many years [the "*Ladies Handbook*" was] the best-selling volume in its field. Thousands upon thousands of ladies brought their children up on the "*Ladies' Handbook*," and went to it for advice when children were ill or they themselves needed some practical treatment.<sup>34</sup>

Dr. Richards's distinguished career as a physician earned her the love and respect of her patients, her church, and the wider community. All three of her children worked in the medical profession: John was a dentist; Franklinna also graduated with a bachelor of dental surgery in 1946 to practice dentistry; and Wilfred was a doctor. Although Dr. Richards officially retired in 1943, she continued to serve her community and church in her later years. She lived in her home at 91 Fox Valley Road in Wahroonga until the final years of her life, when she moved to Manly to live with her son John and daughter-in-law Daisy.<sup>35</sup> Dr. Eulalia Richards died peacefully at her son's home on March 15, 1956, leaving a legacy of healthful living and medical missionary work both in and beyond the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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