

Nicholson, Donald (1882–1954) and Lillian Sophia Maud (Clarke) (1883–1965)

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Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Donald and Lillian Nicholson spent 17 years between 1915 and 1932 as pioneer missionaries in the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides.

Early Years

Donald Nicholson was born at Sandringham in suburban Melbourne, Victoria, on December 25, 1882. His birth certificate indicates he was born out of wedlock to Flora Harris. His father's name is simply recorded "Donald." Nicholson may, therefore, be an assumed or adopted surname. He never wrote of his blood parents or even parents who may have adopted him. The first twenty years of Nicholson's life is cloaked in mystery. His recorded story begins with his brief statement that he was apprenticed as a carpenter and engineer, and baptized on March 5, 1903² There is every



Donald and Lillian Nicholson, c. 1929. Donald and Lillian Nicholson in Perth, Australia, likely during a furlough from their work in what is now Vanuatu in the 1920s. From the Review and Herald Publishing Association Photographic Collection, General Conference Archives.

indication that all these events took place in Western Australia, for first mention of Nicholson in denominational records place him in the gold-mining town of Kalgoorlie in 1906.

Preparation for Mission Service

In June 1906, Nicholson began canvassing *Coming King* in Kalgoorlie.³ Monthly reports of the literature evangelism work in Western Australia show that he was selling *Heralds of the Morning* in Bunbury in 1908,⁴ *Home and Health* in Cannington, suburban Perth, in 1909⁵ and *Desire of Ages* in Katanning in 1910.⁶ He proved to be a competent salesman.

Towards the end of 1910, he married Lilian Sophia Maud Clarke.⁷ Lilian Clarke was born in Bridgetown, Western Australia, in 1883 to farmers James and Eliza (Giblett) Clarke.⁸ She had graduated in 1906 from the teacher's course at the Avondale School for Christian Workers (ASCW)⁹ and returned in 1907 to Western Australia to be the first female teacher at the new Darling Range School.¹⁰ In 1909, she was elected as the young people's director and missionary secretary for the West Australian Conference.¹¹

A short time after their marriage, which took place in August 1910 in the Clarke farm house at Cookernup, Western Australia, the newlyweds travelled east to Cooranbong, New South Wales, where Donald Nicholson enrolled in the missionary course at the ASCW. He graduated in 1912.¹² While they waited for an overseas mission appointment, Donald Nicholson did some Bible work in the New South Wales Conference and Lilian Nicholson at the Wahroonga elementary school. They also took basic classes in tropical medicine at the Sydney Sanitarium. After a two-year wait, they were chosen for mission work in the Solomon Islands.¹³

In the Solomon Islands

The Nicholsons sailed from Sydney on March 30, 1915, aboard the *Kulambangara*¹⁴ and began work in the Marovo Lagoon at Sasaghana village. Living quarters were built of native materials. Their first task was to organize the construction of another structure made of native materials to serve as a church and school.¹⁵ The elementary school eventually opened on September 13 with Lilian Nicholson as teacher, her only cupboard being a box nailed to the wall.¹⁶ The first annual council held in the Solomon Islands took place at Sasaghana over the 1917/1918 New Year period. The meeting included the baptism of ten people, the first Adventist converts in the Solomon Islands. At the same time, a decision was made to transfer the Marovo Lagoon headquarters to Telina village.¹⁷ Donald Nicholson established the new station and Lilian Nicholson once again conducted the school.¹⁸ Among her students at Sasaghana and Telina were young men who would become missionaries themselves, men such as Jugha, Kioto, Rini, Ghusa Peo, Barnabas Pana, and Kata Rangaso. She reported that there were more than fifty students in her Telina school in 1919.¹⁹

In the New Hebrides

During a furlough in Australia in 1920, the Nicholson's were appointed to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). They sailed aboard the *Makambo* in December 1920,²⁰ and began their work at the Big Bay station on the island of Espiritu Santo. Once again, they operated an elementary school to train national missionaries.²¹

In 1923, the Nicholsons transferred to Ambrym Island to capitalize on some mission work done by students who had returned to the island from the Atchin school.²² Donald Nicholson constructed a hut of native materials to live in at Baiap on the southern coast. In addition, he soon had a school building erected in which Lilian Nicholson taught an eager class.²³ The station prospered and its influence spread rapidly with another outpost opening at Malavet. Within two years, sufficient individuals were baptized to organize a church at both Baiap²⁴ and Malavet.²⁵

On their return to Australia in 1926 for a furlough, Donald Nicholson was ordained in the Wahroonga church on January 29.²⁶ They spent their holiday in Western Australia with the Clarke family and then sailed back to the New Hebrides. They were asked to locate to the headquarters station on Atchin Island and Donald Nicholson acted as the superintendent's assistant, using the mission boat to visit other islands in order to conduct baptisms, and ferry supplies and personnel from station to station.²⁷ Then, towards the end of their term of service, he was officially elected secretary of the New Hebrides Mission.²⁸

Last Years

The Nicholsons returned to their homeland in 1932 and settled in Victoria, taking up private employment. They had no children. A clue to Donald Nicholson's separation from denominational employment may be found in a letter written to Australian headquarters by John Radley in 1941 in which he advises that Nicholson not be involved in long-running court proceedings over the Aore property in the New Hebrides. It was alleged that Nicholson had prejudiced the case by arguing earlier against the Adventist mission.²⁹ Donald Nicholson died on October 3, 1954,³⁰ and was buried in the Box Hill Cemetery in suburban Melbourne. Not having money to purchase a burial plot, Lilian Nicholson arranged to have him interred in the same grave as her cousin, spinster Amy Clarke, who had died five years earlier.³¹ After her husband's death Lilian Nicholson retired to Inverloch on the south coast of Victoria. She died on March 8, 1965,³² and was buried in the Presbyterian section of the Lilydale Lawn Cemetery in a pauper's grave.³³ Both Donald and Lilian Nicholson's graves are unmarked.

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