

Gibson, Geoffrey Wynstan (1930–2009)

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Alexander Shand Currie, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) retired in 2001 as assistant to the president of the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Sydney, Australia. A New Zealander by birth, Currie has served the Church as a pastor, evangelist, college teacher, director of Theological Education, departmental director at conference and union levels, hospital chaplain, and administrator. In retirement he oversees International Children's Care Children's operations in Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines and Solomon Island Educational Support. He has authored significant publications and magazine articles. He is married to Beverley with four adult sons, twelve grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Geoffrey Wynstan Gibson was an Adventist educator and administrator employed by the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) where he was awarded the Independence Medal in 1976 and the Order of the British Empire in 1983 for services to education.

Gibson was one of a small number of volunteer "missionaries" who shared his Christian values by the way he lived.¹ In July 1985, after serving the government of PNG for thirty years, he was appointed head of the Department of Education at Pacific Adventist College, Port Moresby²

Early Life and Education

Geoffrey Gibson was delivered in a birthing cottage on March 13, 1930,³ at Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital, the second of three sons born to Henry James (Harry) Gibson (1893-1975) and Esther Mary Brown (1898-1977).⁴ His parents' stories from both their Solomon Island mission days and the experiences of his forebears inspired in him a desire to serve people in distant lands.⁵ The Gibson family tree included such notables as Reverend L. L. Brown who left a comfortable living in England to serve as a missionary to a relatively small community in



Geoffrey Gibson receiving his diploma in education from Melbourne University in 1952.

Photo courtesy of Col Gibson.

Canterbury, New Zealand. Nel Brown, an aunt, served as a nurse in World War 1. An uncle, Philip Pope, who Gibson first met in Timaru, South New Zealand, while they were visiting his grandmother, and with whom he stayed in their Wimbledon home while studying at London University, had served as a major in the British Army in India.⁶ Undoubtedly their stories of service influenced young Gibson.

Geoffrey Gibson's father was a soldier in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I, serving in No. 2 Australian Stationary Hospital (referred to as 2ASH), stationed on Lemnos Island, the jumping off point for the Gallipoli landings. On returning home, Harry Gibson would not talk about his experience and refused to attend commemorations of the war for the rest of his life.⁷

Returning to civilian life after the war, Harry Gibson registered at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital seeking qualifications as a registered nurse. While studying there, he fell in love with a young teacher from New Zealand, Esther Mary Brown. Both graduated from the nursing program in 1924 and were employed by the Warburton Sanitarium and Hospital. They were married by Pastor F. A. Allum in the Warburton Seventh-day Adventist church on November 15, 1925.⁸ Soon after their wedding, the young couple accepted an invitation to be medical missionaries in the Solomon Islands, serving in the Marovo Lagoon and later on Malaita Island. Medical reasons, possibly appendicitis,⁹ caused their return to Australia where Harry Gibson was employed, first in the treatment rooms at 13 Hunter Street, Sydney, for the Sanitarium Health Food Company, (SHF) and sometime later in the retail shop.

The Gibson family rented a cottage on Blytheswood Avenue in Warrawee, Sydney. The Gibson family, having served as missionaries, struggled financially as did most families during the Great Depression and war years. While still in primary school, Geoffrey Gibson and his brothers helped the local milkman, who owned a horse-drawn milk cart, serve customers with half a quart or more of milk from a large bulk tank into household billies. Gibson enrolled at Warrawee Public School in 1937, one month before he turned seven, and attended until November 1941 when the family sailed on the *Mariposa* for New Zealand. From their Warrawee home, the family walked to the old Wahrenonga church every Sabbath¹⁰ as the family did not own a car until after the children left home. ¹¹.

Although young for secondary school, Gibson was sufficiently advanced to enroll at Christchurch West High School (currently Hagley Community College) where, amongst other subjects, he studied French and Latin. At the young age of almost 16,¹² he enrolled at Canterbury University in Christchurch where he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1948, majoring in history with a minor in education. In 1947, he was awarded a John Connal Scholarship¹³ which is awarded annually on the basis of 200-level examination results to the three or four best students in English, French, History, Latin or Mathematics.¹⁴ The next year he completed a Master of Arts degree with honors in history.¹⁵

James Hight, a professor at the university, had a significant influence on Geoffrey Gibson.¹⁶ It appears, Gibson was significantly influenced by Hight's persona, teaching style, and character qualities such as his friendliness to

students.

Besides study, although shy and reserved, Gibson enjoyed life, working manually in market gardens and farms in Canterbury, riding motorcycles with brother Col and friends on trips in both North and South Islands, and socializing with Adventist youth in the Bealey Avenue Hall in central Christchurch.¹⁷

In 1950, Geoffrey and Col Gibson, enrolled as students at Avondale Missionary College. W. G. C. Murdoch's appointment in 1947, as principal of Avondale Missionary College, attracted many students, including a contingent from New Zealand in 1950, which included the two Gibson brothers.¹⁸ Geoffrey Gibson studied subjects such as church history under A. F. J. Kranz and education under E. Gordon McDowell. Each afternoon Gibson taught at Avondale High School as part of the college's work-study program.¹⁹ He was appointed a teacher at Warburton Adventist School in 1951. The next year, 1952, he enrolled as a full-time student at Melbourne University, completing a Diploma of Education. In 1953, he taught at Mentone Grammar School.²⁰

A Life of Service

Now that Gibson was well equipped educationally, he desired to serve overseas but the Adventist Church had a policy of not appointing single men as missionary teachers even though the Church appointed single women. Consequently, he applied to the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government administration to teach in a secondary school and was appointed to Sogeri High School in 1956. Sogeri was created by the Australian Administration for New Guinea after the Second World War to help educate and prepare people who would serve PNG well when it became independent. Students were carefully selected to attend this elite high school. Now 25 years old, Gibson began making an impact among the bright students attending his classes. In 2003, a former Sogeri student, who enrolled at Sogeri, the same year Gibson commenced teaching there, reminisced in the national newspaper about Gibson's influence. "As an educator, he spread the good news by teaching, studying and above all, practising in life what had been taught." The writer continued "Many of us are still practising things he imparted to us. I thank Geof for helping many become what they are today—honest, hardworking, committed, caring, loving, transparent, accountable and incorruptible."²¹ Writing about Gibson and his students, Laurie Meintjes, who served in PNG as a public servant for many years and who became a fellow academic, wrote: "A man of utmost integrity, Geof dedicated himself to his work and is remembered with affection by hundreds of past students..."²² He added, "Geof maintained close contact with his students over the years, encouraging them in service, praying with and for them, following their careers and sponsoring their further education or that of their children."²³

Gibson always carried more than a full load. He taught full time during the first year at Sogeri and stayed connected with the school until the end of 1973; however, after 1957 he was a visiting specialist to PNG's Primary Teacher's Colleges. From 1957 until the end of 1959, he was also appointed as guidance officer, which morphed to senior guidance officer, to the nation's high school system. This role covered overseeing the

secondary school scholarship scheme, which included selection, placement and supervision, for PNG students selected to study overseas. He was responsible for the Teacher's Tour program where selected teachers were given tours of Australia to obtain background understanding, knowledge, and experience in a different country, culture, and education system.²⁴

In 1959, Gibson was made the regional inspector of schools in which capacity he worked until 1961 when he was made superintendent of teacher education. In this position, held until 1964, Gibson was responsible for inspections and curriculum in all teachers' colleges in PNG, both government and private. During 1960, he undertook post-graduate studies in education at the Institute of Education, University of London where he was awarded a Diploma AIE (Lond). Between 1959 and 1964, he was also acting director at various times of the Primary and Secondary Divisions of the National Department of Education in PNG.²⁵

Between 1964 and 1966, Gibson was a post-graduate doctoral student in social and philosophical foundations of education and in administrative leadership at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, for which he was awarded a Doctorate in Education. On his return to PNG, Gibson was appointed director of teacher education, advising the director of education on all matters related to preparing teachers for service. He held this position until it was nationalized in 1973.

From January 1974 until June 1985, Gibson was employed by the University of Papua New Guinea as coordinator of the University Diploma in Educational Studies program in tertiary teaching. From July 1985 through 1995, he was the head of the Department of Education at Pacific Adventist College (later University) where he organized and managed primary and secondary teacher training at both diploma and degree levels. During those years, he served on many national government committees including the education committee of the Nursing Council of PNG.²⁶

Following a health scare in the mid 1990s, Gibson retired to Australia where he died on May 14, 2009.²⁷

Awards, Honors, Recognition, and Tributes

As already mentioned, Gibson was awarded the John Connal Scholarship in 1947 by Canterbury University. In 1958, the government of PNG awarded him the Public Service Scholarship. PNG also awarded him the Independence Medal in 1976. He was presented the Order of the British Empire, Queen's Birthday Honours for services to Education in PNG in 1983.²⁸

In summing up Gibson's life, Laurie Meintjes wrote:

Geof was always a private man, and few would know that he was awarded the OBE by Queen Elizabeth on June 11, 1983, for services to education in Papua New Guinea. It is fitting that Queen Elizabeth was then in the 32nd year of her reign, as is recorded in the citation, for it was almost 32 years to the day since Geof had begun

teaching. He was to continue teaching for nearly ten more years before returning to Australia following a health scare. Teaching inhabited the heart and soul of Geof, and he never let go of that high calling. Even in his final months he maintained contact with past pupils as best he could, and was never happier than when he heard back from one or other of his “family” spread throughout the South Pacific and Australia. Not only did Geof win the affection and gratitude of legions of young people, he also won the regard and respect of educators from near and far, many of them working at the highest levels of government or academia. He remained in contact with several of these men and women, even until recently, because he loved the company of fellow teachers and they appreciated his.

Geof never had time to marry, except to his calling, and leaves no wife or children to mourn his passing. However, Geof touched the lives of so many island youth that he has more children, and grandchildren, than could fill a large church. He maintained close contact with his students over the years, encouraging them in service, praying with and for them, following their careers, sponsoring their further education or that of their children, and always urging them in his inimitable “you-can-do-it” style. And even in death he continues to serve the people to whom he dedicated his life, for his entire estate will benefit the work of education in the South Pacific, especially his two favorite corners there, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Yes, Geof was a teacher to the core and his legacy lives on in the countless lives he has touched, and continues to touch, throughout the South Pacific.²⁹

Accomplishments/Legacies

Because Christian values from the Seventh-day Adventist Church were instilled in him at an early age, Geoffrey Gibson’s “life reflected the church’s teachings of charity, humility, faithfulness and hope.”³⁰ Leadership skills were learned by his students in the way he cared and then mentored them when placed in leadership positions. Dozens of teachers and leaders in PNG owed much to him. Two such leaders, Sir Paulias Matane, governor general of Papua New Guinea, July 25, 2004 to December 13, 2010, and Sir Michael Somare, prime minister, were his students.³¹

Gibson, not only served the PNG government administration with distinction, becoming the head of the Division of Teacher Education, but also served the Seventh-day Adventist Church by living its values, and providing advice and good counsel to the Church when founding Sonoma Adventist College in 1968.³² The last ten years of his teaching career were spent at Pacific Adventist University,³³ which in 1997 had been given a charter as a university by the Papua New Guinea government, helped to a great degree by Gibson’s influence.

At the time of Gibson’s death, His Excellency Sir Paulias Matane, GCL, GCMG. KSTJ, KT, CMG, OBE, Governor General of Papua New Guinea wrote:

Dr. Geoffrey W. Gibson came to Papua New Guinea, not for money but for committed service to the people of Papua New Guinea.

I met Mr. Geof W. Gibson for the first time in 1956 at Sogeri High School outside Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. He was a high school teacher there whilst I was there to be trained as a school teacher. I was there with a number of young and energetic people from many parts of PNG who later became effective and productive teachers. Some of these went on to serve the country in various capacities in government, politics, business and the church and included our current Prime Minister, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare; Sir Alkan To Lolo, the first PNG citizen to become Secretary for Education; Sir Sere Pitoi who became the first citizen to become Chairman of the Public Service Board; and Sir Ronald To Vue who later became the Premier of East New Britain Province. They were some of the people who built PNG to be what it is today: a Christian, free, democratic and a fast-growing independent country.

Before and after the Second World War, the only white people who came close to the PNG natives were missionaries, patrol officers, and plantation operators. The most aggressive of these were the plantation operators who "barked" at, and treated the natives very badly. We were not allowed to sit close to, or have friendly discussions with them. Obviously, we were scared of them. In fact, generally we were all scared of white people.

For some unknown reasons, in early 1956 at Sogeri, Mr. Gibson invited me to have lunch with him in his residence. For a native to be invited to eat with a white man was unheard of at that time. And so, I nervously knocked at his door. He opened the door, smiled and said: "Good day Paulias. Welcome to my residence. I have cooked some food, and prepared the table for us. Come and sit on this chair." As I sat down, many things attracted my attention. These included plates, knives, forks and spoons. At my jungle village, we used leaves as plates and fingers to pick up our food to eat. What are these forks, knives and spoons for? I asked myself.

He then went to the kitchen, brought bowls of food, and put them on the table. I could not believe a white man preparing food for a native. Then he said, "Let's pray for God's blessings on our food." And he prayed. Then he said: "I have to tell you something to follow when we eat. 1. Sit up straight. 2. Hold the fork on the food with your left hand, and cut the food with the knife with your right hand; 3. Lift the food with your fork and put it in your mouth; and 4. Close your mouth as you eat."

Whilst we were eating, he made me feel at home by telling me many stories about life, kindness and love for others, even our enemies. On other similar occasions, in class and out, Geof shared many things with us, things to assist a person to become purposeful, useful, productive, and progressive in what we do in life. I found these difficult to understand at first, but gradually they made good sense.

After I graduated from the Sogeri Teachers' Training Centre, I was posted to my bush village school as an assistant teacher in January 1957. Geof and another expatriate Education Officer came to my village to visit me. He continued to show interest in me and my work, through visits and letters, always encouraging me to do better, and by early 1958, I became the Headmaster of that school. In 1959, I was chosen to be one of the ten PNG teachers to spend a month visiting places of educational interest in Queensland.

In 1963 the Education Department leaders started a special program for selected primary school teachers to be trained as either headmasters of bigger primary schools or to be school inspectors. The man to lead the project was Geof Gibson. And I was one of the teachers selected to the program. I was later posted as school inspector of a number of schools, first in the Mendi Valley of the Southern Highlands, then to Waghi Valley of the Western Highlands Province. In 1966, I was posted to the Kokopo District in New Britain as School Inspector there. In November that year, New Britain was split into two: East and West New Britain Provinces. I was posted to West New Britain as the first Provincial School Inspector there from January 1967 to 1968. And who was always around to check on me and the others? It was Geof Gibson. One thing that he insisted we each do was to write and send fortnightly reports on our activities to his office in Port Moresby. He read these very carefully and always made useful comments on them. Writing those reports encouraged me to start writing yearly diaries. And I have been writing my diaries ever since 1963!!!

In January 1969, I was transferred to Port Moresby to become a Superintendent of Teacher Education, and to be in charge of all Teachers' Colleges in PNG. That did not last long because by April that year, I won a place in the newly established Public Service Board which was responsible for all public servants in the country.

In January 1971, I became the first PNG citizen to become Secretary of the new department, the Department of Business Development. I managed the department till May 1975 when the government appointed me as PNG's Ambassador to the USA, Mexico, and the United Nations, and High Commissioner of Canada. In August 1980 I returned to PNG to become the secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, a position I held until 31 December, 1985 when I retired from the Public Service, but not from public service. During those busy years, Dr. Geof Gibson was always around to give advice. But he did not advise me only in professional work; he spent more time helping me with advice on practical Christian living. I owe everything to him.

I want to end here by thanking Geof for helping many of lead useful, well-integrated lives. Geof, the members of my family, those whose lives you shaped, and generally, the people the PNG, salute you for your love and care for us. Although your life has gone, one thing is certain...you are alive in our hearts. May your kind and selfless soul rest in eternal peace."³⁴

The citation was signed, Paulias Matane, Governor General, Serving with love from Government House!

Geoffrey Gibson's life influenced the lives of so many, particularly in PNG, drawing their highest praises and tributes. Few have made such an impact for Christian values while working and serving in society.

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NOTES

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5. Col Gibson, interview by the author, Cooranbong, New South Wales, December 12, 2019.
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7. Ibid.
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30. Mike Green, "A Teacher Who Inspired and Led by Example," *The Press* [Christchurch, New Zealand], June 13, 2009, D17.
31. Laurie Meintjes, "Life Sketch," read by Dr. Ray Wilkinson at funeral service, May, 2009.
32. The author was personally involved with committees in Rabaul for which Geoffrey Gibson advised and provided guidance between 1967 and 1970 for the development of Sonoma College where primary teachers were trained beginning in 1970.
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