

Steward, Mary Alicia (1858–1947)

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Mary Alicia Steward was a skilled writer, editor, and proofreader who quietly and steadily contributed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church for over half a century. She worked as an editor and proofreader at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, the Battle Creek Sanitarium, and the Southern Publishing Association, assisted Ellen G. White as an editor and proofreader, and eventually led the proofreading department of the Review and Herald Publishing Association.



Mary A. Steward, c. 1880s.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

Early Life

Mary Alicia Steward was born August 27, 1858, in Mauston, Wisconsin to Thaddeus Steward (1827-1907) and Myrta (Wells) Steward (1832-1928).¹ They lived in Wisconsin until 1864, when the Stewards moved to Rockton, Illinois.² There the family stayed until 1874, when her parents decided to move to Battle Creek, Michigan so that Mary could attend the recently opened Battle Creek College.³ Her brother, John William (1874-1903), was born that same year.⁴ After taking preparatory classes, Mary took the collegiate English Course, graduating as part of the class of 1880.⁵

Career

Upon graduation, Steward began work at the Review and Herald Publishing House as one of its proofreaders. She worked there from 1880 to 1892.⁶ During that time, she worked on at least one edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*⁷ and was involved in the creation of *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymn and Tune Book for Use in*

Divine Worship (1886), more commonly known as *Hymns and Tunes*, setting type for the music and proofreading pages.⁸ Steward also contributed poetry and short prose to the *Review*.⁹

From 1892 to 1900, Steward worked as a proofreader for John Harvey Kellogg and the Battle Creek Sanitarium, utilizing her editing skills as well as contributing pieces for the monthly magazines *Good Health* and *The Gospel of Health*.¹⁰ As part of the Good Health Publishing Company, she worked with people such as Eva (Bell) Giles (1857-1931) and Emma L. Shaw (1840-1924).¹¹ During this time, Steward also had work published in other Adventist periodicals such as *The Home Missionary*, the *Youth's Instructor*, and the *Review*.

While living in Battle Creek, Steward was a member of and served for a time as treasurer of the Michigan Woman's Press Association, founded by a group of women writers in 1890 as an organization for women in Michigan who worked as writers and journalists.¹² This group included such Seventh-day Adventist writers and editors as Esther (Harris) Whitney (1847-1936) and Eva (Bell) Giles.¹³ Membership in the association was open to "[a]ny woman, resident of Michigan, who is regularly connected in a literary way with any reputable newspaper or magazine, or who is engaged in literary work for publication."¹⁴ Steward certainly qualified.

During the 1900-1901 school year, Steward taught at Battle Creek College. From 1901 to 1902, she worked as a proofreader for Ellen G. White and also for the Southern Publishing Association in Nashville, Tennessee. She then taught music and English for two years at Graysville Academy in Tennessee, followed by another two years working as a proofreader at the Southern Publishing Association.¹⁵ During this time, her father grew ill, and so she spent a year at home with her parents, helping care for her father in his last year of life. Shortly after his death in 1907,¹⁶ Steward, accompanied by her mother, moved to St. Helena, California, where she was once again employed by Ellen G. White as an editor and proofreader.¹⁷ After Ellen White's death in 1915, Steward moved across the country to Maryland to again work for the Review and Herald Publishing Association as an editor and proofreader.¹⁸

During the 1920s and 1930s, Steward was the head of the proof room at the Review and Herald. She supervised eight other proofreaders, who handled everything from pamphlets produced by General Conference departments and offices, to quarterly, monthly, and weekly periodicals, to books. Not only did the proofreaders check for grammatical errors, but they also fact-checked statements, statistics, and quotations as well as routinely making suggestions for better prose. In fact, Steward wrote, the women in the proofroom often were "using those good brains of theirs to make some one perhaps less gifted appear what he is not—a good writer."¹⁹ Her expertise in such matters led to the publication of her book, "A Guide to Correct English", in 1930.²⁰ She held this important but behind-the-scenes role full-time until 1933, when she applied to the denominational sustentation fund "on account of age and [the] depression."²¹ She was seventy-four years old and had served for fifty-three years.

Steward continued part-time work for the Review and Herald Publishing Association until 1937, at which time she fully retired and was granted the “full family rate from the sustentation” since “her work among us has been of such an outstanding nature, from both the standpoint of length of service and the responsible nature of her work.”²²

Later Life

Mary Steward stayed at her home in Takoma Park, Maryland, until an accident of unknown nature and subsequent deteriorating health led her to take up residence in a rest home near family in Graysville, Tennessee, in late 1945.²³ She died two years later, on January 20, 1947. Her funeral was held at the Graysville Seventh-day Adventist Church on January 22, 1947.²⁴

Legacy

For over five decades, writing by Seventh-day Adventists regularly passed under Mary A. Steward’s capable pen. Even when she was not the official proofreader of a work, her leadership in the Proofreading Department and her creation of a book used for many years as the Review and Herald Publishing Association’s stylebook meant that she “had a wide influence on the style and quality”²⁵ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s many publications and, therefore, on broader Seventh-day Adventist culture.

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"Will N. Steward." *ARH*, October 15, 1903.

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NOTES

1. "Mary A. Steward," *ARH*, March 27, 1947, 23; J. E. Tenney, "Thaddeus Moore Steward," *ARH*, June 6, 1907, 31; "Myrta Elizabeth Wells Steward," *ARH*, November 1, 1928, 22. See also Theodore N. Levterov, "Steward, Thaddeus Moore (1827–1907) and Myrta Elizabeth (Wells) (1832–1928)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed August 22, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=BA8C>.
2. "Business Notes," *ARH*, March 29, 1864, 144.
3. "Mary A. Steward," *ARH*.
4. "Will N. Steward," *ARH*, October 15, 1903, 23.

5. "English Course," *Fourth annual catalogue of the officers and students of Battle Creek College, located at Battle Creek, Michigan, with the courses of study, rules and regulations for the college year 1877-8* (Battle Creek, MI: Review & Herald Publishing House, 1878), 26. LF 9671, Pamphlets Collection, General Conference Archives. Steward is listed in this catalogue as "Mary A. Stewart," but in correspondence by Mary, her surname is written *Steward*.
6. "Sustentation Fund Application for Mary Alicia Steward," January 10, 1933, Fld. Steward, Mary A., Box 9791, RG 33, General Conference Archives.
7. F. E. Belden, "1889 Year Book," *ARH*, October 9, 1888, 640.
8. H. E. Simkin, "'Hymns and Tunes': A Reminiscence," *ARH*, October 6, 1921, 19.
9. See, for example, Mary A. Steward, "Could We Know?," *ARH*, September 18, 1883, 595; and Mary A. Steward, "Kept From Evil Thoughts," *ARH*, April 26, 1892, 260.
10. "Sustentation Fund Application for Mary Alicia Steward," January 10, 1933, Fld. Steward, Mary A., Box 9791, RG 33, General Conference Archives.
11. "Evangeline Bell Giles," *ARH*, April 23, 1931, 29; "Miss E. L. Shaw," *The Literary Century*, May 1893, 395-398, and "Woman's Death Reveals Story of 'Bachelor Girls,'" *Detroit Free Press*, February 6, 1924, 24; "Returns to Washington," *Battle Creek Enquirer*, October 6, 1925, 7.
12. "With Great Eclat Is Organized the Michigan Women's Press Association," *Grand Rapids Herald*, July 25, 1890, 6.
13. See "Mrs. B. L. Whitney," *ARH*, December 31, 1936, 21; "Literary Notices," *Health Reformer*, June 1, 1893, 192; "Evangeline Bell Giles"; and "Elected Officers Yesterday," *Detroit Free Press*, July 13, 1900, 2.
14. "Michigan Woman's Press Association," *The Detroit Free Press*, March 26, 1899, 30.
15. "Mary Alicia Steward," *Southern Tidings*, February 12, 1947, 7; "Sustentation Fund Application for Mary Alicia Steward," January 10, 1933, Fld. Steward, Mary A., Box 9791, RG 33, General Conference Archives.
16. Tenney, "Thaddeus Moore Steward."
17. For a brief look at what Steward and others like her did in this role, see Norma Collins, "Literary Assistants," in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 941-943.
18. "Sustentation Fund Application for Mary Alicia Steward," January 10, 1933, Fld. Steward, Mary A., Box 9791, RG 33, General Conference Archives.

19. Mary A. Steward, "In the Proofroom," *ARH*, January 15, 1920, 12-13.
 20. "Review and Herald Publishes Handbook," *The Sligonian*, March 6, 1930, 2. An advertisement for the book can be seen in *ARH*, June 26, 1930, 30.
 21. "Sustentation Fund Application for Mary Alicia Steward," January 10, 1933, Fld. Steward, Mary A., Box 9791, RG 33, General Conference Archives.
 22. W. P. Elliott to H. H. Cobban, January 6, 1938. Fld. Steward, Mary A., Box 9791, RG 33, General Conference Archives.
 23. H. H. Cobban to Mary Steward, August 3, 1945, and Mrs. Carl Adams to General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, February 28, 1946. Fld. Steward, Mary A., Box 9791, RG 33, General Conference Archives.
 24. "Mary A. Steward," *ARH*; "Mary Alicia Steward," *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January 22, 1947, 9.
 25. "Mary Alicia Steward," *Southern Tidings*.
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