

# Steley, Dennis

## (1945–2007)

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### JENNIFER FAYE STELEY

Jennifer Faye Steley, B.Ed. (Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW Australia) was born in Sydney Australia and taught in SDA secondary schools in the Solomon Islands and Auckland New Zealand before teaching at St Leo's Catholic College, Wairoa, Australia. Later she was employed in Human Resources at Adventist Aged Care, Wairoa. Since retirement in 2010, she has been part of a number of church sponsored overseas 'fly'n'build' projects. Jennifer has 2 adult sons, Jared and Daniel.

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Dennis Steley was one of the first to complete, at the doctoral level, academic research on the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the islands of the South Pacific. He was an author of note.

### Early Life

On March 16, 1945, Dennis was born in Maryborough, QLD.<sup>1</sup> He was the second son of Margaret Gwendoline (Schnitzerling) and Fernie (Frank) Steley. They were divorced just 18 months after his birth, and Dennis grew up not knowing his father. Dennis, with his mother and older brother, moved back to her family home in Warwick, QLD, and after a number of years settled in Ipswich, QLD, where he attended state primary and secondary school, becoming junior sprint champion for Queensland. His mother and his brother Don became Seventh-day Adventists in 1961. A little later Ken Lowe also baptized Dennis.<sup>2</sup>

### Education and Marriage

In 1963 Dennis began a boilermaker's apprenticeship in Ipswich, QLD, working in this capacity till 1967. In 1968 he enrolled in the theology course at Avondale College. Two years later he changed his course of study to secondary teaching. In 1971 he received a Bachelor of Arts in Education, with a history major and art minor.<sup>3</sup>



Dennis Steley

Photo courtesy of Milton Hook.

While at Avondale College Dennis met Jennifer Faye Wicks. They were married on August 25, 1970, at Cooranbong, NSW.<sup>4</sup> Jennifer had been born in Sydney on December 11, 1948.<sup>5</sup> She was the daughter of Faye Lois (Stanford) and Allan William Wicks and the granddaughter of pioneer missionaries to the Solomon and Cook Islands, Harold Bulmer Priestly Wicks and Madeline (Bates). Jennifer grew up in the mid north coast district of Taree, NSW, and completed her primary and secondary education there. She attended Avondale College, graduating in 1966 from the Accountancy Certificate course, and was employed at the Sanitarium Health Food Company office on the same estate, from 1967 to 1972. Between 1970 and 1972 she took studies at the college and graduated with a B.A. Ed. with a geography major and commerce minor. Later, in 1989, she upgraded to a B.Ed. at the same institution.<sup>6</sup>

## A Career of Service

After graduation from Avondale College, Dennis taught at St. Edwards Christian Brothers School, Gosford, NSW, during 1972.<sup>7</sup> After Jennifer's graduation at the end of that year, Dennis and Jennifer both accepted teaching positions at Betikama High School, British Solomon Island Protectorate.<sup>8</sup> They both taught there from 1973 to 1977, and Dennis taught there in 1978.<sup>9</sup>

While teaching at Betikama High School, Dennis established a school industry, making copper plaques and selling them to tourists who visited the capital, Honiara.<sup>10</sup> This venture helped support the school financially for many years.<sup>11</sup> His thirst for adventure along with his love of history and the location of Betikama on Guadalcanal, amid the battlefields and storage sites of World War II, saw Dennis and other willing and enthusiastic teachers, both expatriate and indigenous, search out and retrieve many war relics, including aircraft parts, guns, and personal items, for inclusion in a war museum at Betikama.<sup>12</sup> It was during this time that he also began to research SDA history in the Solomon Islands.<sup>13</sup> He conducted interviews with many elderly Solomon Island pioneers who had been alive when G. F. Jones first came to the Solomon Islands in 1914.

In 1976 Dennis began to care for a small church group in an oil palm plantation on the Guadalcanal plains to the east of Honiara. It was called "The Drain."<sup>14</sup> Each Sabbath morning a number of students and staff would conduct a branch Sabbath School at the plantation for the workers and their families. Over time this group grew into an organized church. It was also in 1976 that their first son, Jared Scott, was born in Newcastle, NSW, on January 16, 1976.<sup>15</sup> Their second son, Daniel Anthony, was also born in Newcastle on November 9, 1978.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of 1978 Dennis and Jennifer transferred to Auckland Adventist High School, New Zealand. Dennis taught there from 1979 until 1988. Jennifer taught from 1984 until 1988.<sup>17</sup> It was while living in Auckland that Dennis completed an M.A. Honours degree from Auckland University in 1983. His thesis, in partial fulfillment of the degree was titled "Juapa Rane: The Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Solomon Islands, 1914-1942"<sup>18</sup> Following the completion of his degree, he commenced study toward a Ph.D. at the same institution. He completed his Ph.D. in 1990. His dissertation title was " 'Unfinished': The Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the

South Pacific (Excluding Papua New Guinea), 1886–1986.”<sup>19</sup>

After studying and working in Auckland for 10 years, the family returned to Australia in 1989, where Dennis was employed, teaching primarily visual arts, at Sydney Adventist College.<sup>20</sup> Jennifer was seconded to the Education Department of the South Pacific Division in Wahroonga, Sydney, NSW, for the year.<sup>21</sup> She primarily worked to produce geography curriculum materials to be distributed to Adventist secondary schools within the SPD. In 1990 she began employment with St. Leo’s Catholic College, Wahroonga, NSW, teaching business studies, commerce, and geography. She remained there until mid-2007, when she began employment at the Adventist aged-care facility in Wahroonga, where she was the human resource officer until her retirement in 2010.<sup>22</sup>

## Later Life

Dennis retired from teaching at Sydney Adventist College in 2002 after struggling with chronic fatigue syndrome for many years. After a one-year break he returned to the workforce as a part-time recreational activities officer at two local aged-care facilities. His health had improved remarkably when he died unexpectedly on November 6, 2007, at home in Wahroonga, NSW.<sup>23</sup> He is buried in the Avondale Cemetery, Cooranbong, NSW.

Since retirement Jennifer has participated in a number of mission projects to Timor Leste, Mongolia, Vanuatu, and Fiji. She is a member of the Wahroonga Adventist School Council and the Fox Valley SDA church finance committee, among other interests.

## Contribution

Dennis’ Ph.D. and M.A. theses in particular have contributed to the recording of the history of the SDA Church in the South Pacific. His first published book, *Walkabout Long Canoe*, was published in 1979.<sup>24</sup> He contributed to the first Adventist history symposium, held at Monash University, Melbourne, in 1985.<sup>25</sup> The *Australasian Record* has contained many articles authored by Dennis concerning achievements of students and staff at Betikama in the Solomon Islands.<sup>26</sup>

Dennis’ grave plaque reads:

*Adventurer, Artist, Historian, and Dreamer*

*Collector, Inventor, and Philosopher.*

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## SOURCES

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Dennis Steley Service Records. South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives. Folder: "Steley, Dennis." Document: "Service Record."

Ford, Desmond. "Steley-Wicks marriage." *Australasian Record*, October 5, 1970.

Jennifer Steley Biographical Records. South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives. Folder: "Steley, Jennifer Faye." Document: "Workers Biographical Record."

Jennifer Steley Personal Service Records. South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives. Folder: "Steley, Jennifer Faye." Document: "Personal Service Record."

Registrar of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Dennis Steley. Extract of Birth Certificate B51111, March 16, 1945. Maryborough, QLD.

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"To the Front Line," *Australasian Record*, May 7, 1973.

"Transitions." *Record*, January 14, 1989.

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## NOTES

1. Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Dennis Steley, Extract of Birth Certificate B51111, March 16, 1945, Maryborough, QLD.
2. Unless otherwise credited, the information in this biography comes from the personal knowledge of the author, spouse of Dennis Steley.
3. Dennis Steley Academic Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives (Folder: "Steley, Dennis"; Document: "Steley, Dennis").
4. Desmond Ford, "Steley-Wicks marriage," *Australasian Record*, October 5, 1970, 14.
5. Jennifer Steley Biographical Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives (Folder: "Steley, Jennifer Faye"; Document: "Workers Biographical Record").
6. Jennifer Steley Personal Service Records, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives (Folder: "Steley, Jennifer Faye"; Document: "Personal Service Record").
7. Dennis Steley Service Records; South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives (Folder: "Steley, Dennis"; Document: "Service Record").
8. "BA Education . . .," *Australasian Record*, January 15, 1973, 16; "To the Front Line," *Australasian Record*, May 7, 1973, 16.
9. Jennifer Steley Personal Service Records.
10. Dennis Steley, "Based on Guadalcanal," unpublished manuscript held in the personal collection of the author, 111, 112.
11. Dennis Steley, "That Was the Week That Was," *Australasian Record*, May 20, 1974, 8, 9.
12. Ibid.
13. Dennis Steley, "Melanesia—1917–1971: Mission Flagship," *Australasian Record*, March 29, 1982, 1.
14. Ibid., 151.
15. Jennifer Steley Biographical Records.
16. Ibid.

17. Jennifer Steley Personal Service Records.
  18. Dennis Steley, "Juapa Rane: The Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Solomon Islands, 1914–1942" (M.A. Thesis, Auckland University, 1983).
  19. Dennis Steley, "'Unfinished': The Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the South Pacific (Excluding Papua New Guinea), 1886-1986" (Ph.D. diss., University of Auckland, 1990).
  20. "Transitions," *Record*, January 14, 1989, 14.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Dennis Steley, "Based on Guadalcanal," 151.
  23. Ray Southon and Peter Fowler, "Dennis Steley obituary," *Record*, February 23, 2008, 14.
  24. Dennis Steley, *Walkabout Long Canoe* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979).
  25. Dennis Steley, "Advances and Reversals in Polynesia," in *Symposium on Adventist History in the South Pacific: 1885–1918*, ed. Arthur J. Ferch (Wahroonga, NSW: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986), 164–173.
  26. Dennis Steley, "Both Horns Are Sharp," *Australasian Record*, August 6, 1973, 6.
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