



Avondale Health Retreat, 1899.

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Avondale Health Retreat, Australia (1899–1935)

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The *Union Conference Record* dated January 1, 1900, announced the dedication of the Avondale Health Retreat on December 27, 1899. It stated that “it would be open for boarders December 28 and be fully prepared to treat the sick on January 1, 1900, providing treatments such as “hydropathic and electrical treatments, massage, etc.”

The official opening, conducted by the New South Wales minister of Mines and Agriculture, J. L. Fegan, took place on December 28, 1899.² The retreat house accommodated about twenty guests with extra rooms for the superintendent and matron Elizabeth Hellier, the nursing staff and helpers. Dr. Silas Rand of Newcastle became the first medical supervisor and consultant of the health retreat.³

The plans to set up such a facility in Cooranbong had progressed through 1897 and 1898, as part of the missionary medical ministry network in Australia.⁴ However, because of financial constraints, an effort to build the health retreat, often referred to as a hospital,⁵ did not commence till the early months of 1899.⁶ The *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, of March 2, 1899, reported, "In connection with the sanitarium in Sydney, a hospital is needed in Cooranbong. This would furnish a retreat for convalescents, and for a large class of patients who need the benefit of the country air and surrounding. And nothing could be a more effective help in medical missionary lines."⁷ Ellen White highlighted the practical benefits of setting up a health retreat. "There is no physician at Cooranbong, or in all the surrounding districts. In sickness the people have to send to Newcastle, twenty miles away, for a doctor, at the expense of \$25 for a visit. The people are poor, and we are constantly called upon to give advice and treatment to the sick, and to minister to the needy and suffering in many ways."⁸ Because of the prevailing needs in the local community, Ellen White exclaimed, "We want that hospital so much."⁹

Ellen White had a number of reasons to establish a hospital in the remote country area, to be named the Avondale Health Retreat. First, at times, Sunnyside, her home in Cooranbong, became "an asylum for the sick and afflicted."¹⁰ Because of the poor conditions of the houses, the suffering "could not be properly cared for."¹¹ Second, her home was frequently visited by "doctors and ministers, overworked women from different departments of the work" seeking a "change and rest" and a place of refuge. She stated that "if there are unoccupied rooms in the Health Home, we can make it a home for the comers and goers."¹² However, the primary motive to set up a health retreat stemmed from her inspired conviction "to be a medical missionary worker" to the sick, motherless and fatherless children, and those experiencing mistreatment and injustice—the vision she continued to practice and expand in Australia.¹³

The health retreat relieved the burden of Ellen White's overtaxing day-to-day responses to the pressing demands associated with medical missionary ministry. At the same time, it enlarged the scope of her contribution to the community and the church.¹⁴ Not only would the retreat provide service for the sick in the local district, but plans were made to "receive patients from Sydney and Newcastle and more distant places" for spiritual and physical healing.¹⁵

The selection of the ground for the health retreat, March 3 and March 27, 1899, encompassed the discussions of two possible sites, one not far from the church and the other near the Avondale school.¹⁶ The committee comprising of Arthur Daniells, Dr. Margaret Caro, Willie White, Iram James, Sara McEnterfer, and Ellen White agreed on the first option, a site opposite the church on Freemans Drive. A few days later, April 2, Ellen White wrote, "We are trying to make every move possible to advance. This hospital must now be erected without delay.

If the Lord favors us, we shall put up a two-story building, and several small houses around it for patients sent out from the Sydney hospital."¹⁷ However, the progress met with financial constraints and a need for ongoing support. Even at the time of the official opening, Ellen White wrote a pleading note to churches in Australasia, asking for financial assistance. "Our Health Retreat, which is ready for use, had a debt on the building already erected, and we need means to properly furnish it for the reception of patients."¹⁸ In response to the many appeals, financial support came from donations by John Harvey, Kellogg, John Loughborough, the Wessels family, S. N. Haskell, and a young girl who offered a "dime" donation. She wrote, "This is all I have."¹⁹

The foundations for the building were laid sometime in April 1899 with eager expectations to "advance just as fast as the providence of God opens the way."²⁰ Indeed, God's providence guided the construction of the health retreat by challenging Ellen White to expand the size of the building. In the vision she was instructed to focus not on the existing financial constraints but the specific purpose of the building. Namely, to provide an adequate space for the "wearied, worried, worn-out ministers" and "another building in which the very sick can be accommodated."²¹

On completion, the rooms of the building were positioned to receive considerable amounts of sunshine. Ellen White's sensitivity to the comfort and rest of the occupants was evident in her advice to keep kitchen and dining room separate. "Then there will be no rattling dishes, no smell of food cooking, and there will be quietness for the sick."²² The 15-room health retreat extended Ellen White's vision of the comprehensive approach to health and well-being. Before the completion of the building, she indicated why the selected place required a more specific identity. "We would not have it misnamed hospital." Instead, it became officially known as the health retreat, a resting place for the overworked church personal and the sick. She mused, "There is health in the air we breathe. . . . It is a quiet restful place here."²³

The health retreat provided a base for the expansion of her medical missionary vision. She observed, "I never have seen such carelessness in regard to the health as I have seen in this community." Further, she saw the service provided in the health retreat as an "entering wedge to the work of saving souls" and referred to prevailing needs in the area as a "missionary soil."²⁴

The first nurses in charge of the institution were John and Elizabeth Hellier of Victoria. Alfred and Carrie Robie from New Hampshire, United States followed them, and they continued their service until in 1901, when the Doctors Daniel H. and Laretta Kress took over as a training school for nurses. With the opening of the Sydney Sanitarium in 1903, and the transfer of the School of Nursing to that institution, the supervision of the health retreat was taken up by a husband-and-wife team, Dr. Thomas A. Sherwin and Dr. Margherita Freeman, who cared for the health retreat as a private hospital for seven years. As time passed, the hospital became a "hydro" and later, an overflow building for college students and then flats. By 1935 the building had outlived its usefulness and was demolished.²⁵

While the building structure came to an end, its legacy has unfolded as an inspirational narrative of Ellen White's lifelong commitment to the physical and spiritual needs of society—a call to medical missionary work. The story of the Avondale Health Retreat calls for a sensitive response to the sick, motherless and fatherless children, and those experiencing mistreatment and injustice. In other words, it provides an inspirational motivation to create a place of refuge and rest.

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1. "The Avondale Health Retreat," *Union Conference Record*, January 1, 1900, 16.

2. In *Herald of Health*, February 1, 1900.

3. "The Avondale Health Retreat."

4. Ellen G. White to G. A. Irwin, letter 88, October 30, 1898, Ellen G. White Research Center; Ellen G. White to Sister Wessels, letter 111, December 1, 1898, Ellen G. White Research Center; Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister Smouse, letter 131, December 31, 1898, Ellen G. White Research Center; Ellen G. White to Managers of the Claremont Sanitarium, letter 143, March 22, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center. In the article "An Appeal," addressed to the church members in Australia, Ellen White included the health retreat as part of the overall mission strategy. She also named the Helping Hand Mission in Melbourne and the Christchurch Health Home (Ellen G. White, "An Appeal," *Union Conference Record*, January 1, 1900, 2).

5. Ellen G. White to S.M.I. Henry, letter 258, June 20, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center.

6. Ellen G. White to Managers of the Claremont Sanitarium, letter 143, September 24, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center. In her letter Ellen White referred to existing financial constraints. "We have erected a country hospital in Cooranbong, but this is heavily in debt. We cannot pay our workmen, and the building is yet to be finished."

7. "The Situation in Australia," *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, March 2, 1899.

8. Ibid.; Ellen G. White to G. I. Butler, letter 74, April 21, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center.

9. Ellen G. White to J. H. Kellogg, letter 73, April 17, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center.
10. Ellen G. White, "A Messenger," *Review and Herald*, July 26, 1906, 8, 9.
11. Ellen G. White to Sister A. H. Robinson, letter 196, November 27, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center.
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19. E. G. White to Elsie Wilson, letter 155, October 6, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center. See also Ellen G. White to Brother and Sister John Wessels, letter 63, April 4, 1899, Ellen G. White Research Center.
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