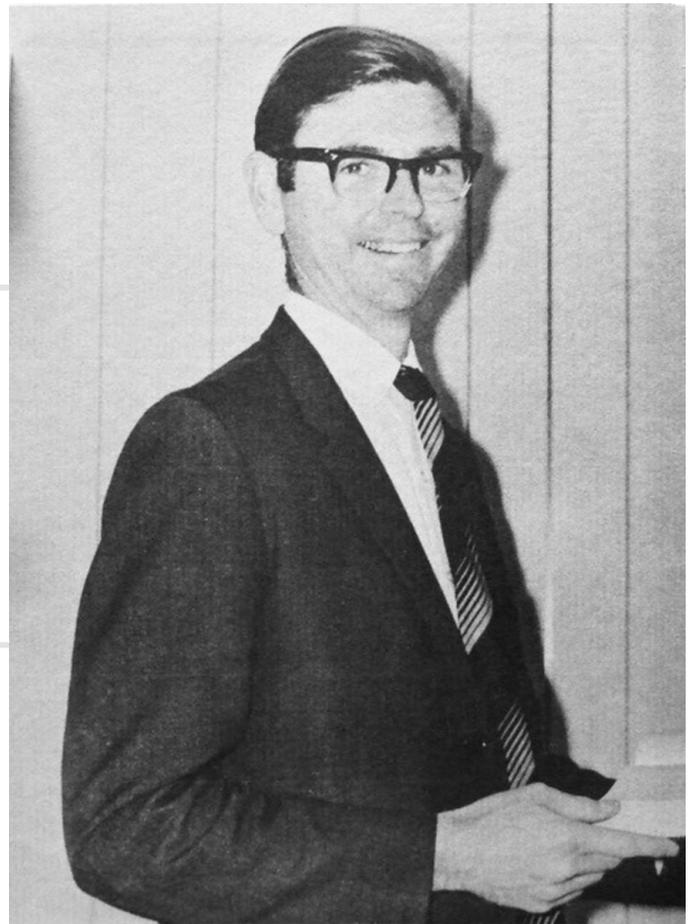


Magnusson, Eric Alfred (1933–2009)

GILBERT M. VALENTINE

Gilbert M. Valentine, Ph.D. has served internationally in teaching and senior administrative roles in Adventist higher education in Europe, Asia, the South Pacific and North America. He has written extensively in Adventist studies and has authored several books, including biographies of *W. W. Prescott* (2005) and *J. N. Andrews* (2019). *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) explored the political influence of Ellen White. He has also written for the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013).

A widely respected research chemist, teacher, and progressive educational administrator, Eric Alfred Magnusson served the Seventh-day Adventist church in the South Pacific at Avondale College, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia, for twenty years, ten leading the Science Department at the college, followed by for ten years as the college principal. During his time of leadership he encouraged research, upgrading of teaching faculty and course quality management enabling the college to achieve a significant breakthrough in securing government recognition of its courses and government tuition scholarships for students enrolled in teacher education and science programs.



Eric Magnusson c. 1975.

From *Jacaranda*.

Family Background and Education (1933–1961)

Eric Magnusson was born on August 9, 1933, in Townsville, Queensland, the eldest of two sons of clergyman Anders Ernest Magnusson (1901–1976) and his wife, Thelma (nee Mason) (1903–1996). Of Swedish descent, Eric's father, familiarly called Ern, was the son of Lutheran immigrants who had left Ulfsmala near Blackaryd in Blekinge County, southern Sweden, in the mid-nineteenth century to undertake gold mining in Victoria, Australia. Unsuccessful in mining, the family moved into farming.¹ Anders spent his early life wheat farming in northern Victoria and then after becoming a Seventh-day Adventist in his early twenties undertook ministerial training at Avondale from 1924 to 1928 when W. W. Prescott was principal. Upon graduation he was appointed

as secretary-treasurer for the Northern Queensland Mission, where on November 4, 1932, at Ayr, he married Thelma Emily Mason.²

Magnusson spent his early childhood in Tasmania, where his father had been assigned for pastoral evangelism. Later school years were spent in a series of Victorian schools, when his father accepted an appointment to the Victorian Conference and moved, according to the custom of the time, around a series of short-term pastorates. Eric's first introduction to Avondale was at the age of 13 when in 1946 his father was appointed to teach Bible during a two-year study leave that had been granted to Nelson Burns, a recently appointed Bible teacher the college wanted to upgrade in America.³

Exceptionally gifted academically, Magnusson obtained his NSW High School Leaving Certificate with subjects that included Latin, chemistry, mathematics (two papers) and geography. Encouraged by British-born college principal, William Murdoch, he enrolled at Avondale in 1951 to study science joined by two other students, Ken Thompson and Laurence Draper. The College that year had introduced a tutored course of studies directed by Ralph Watts to prepare students for the highly regarded University of London Bachelor of Science external exams. Murdoch was eager to establish external educational relationships to strengthen the college. The Australian Church administration was also anxious to begin better resourcing the rising standards of its school system in Australia and to prevent the increasing brain drain of science students going to the USA to study and not returning.⁴ Magnusson passed the rigorous exam with first-class honors in 1953, a year ahead of colleagues. Draper was to later say of him that he "outperformed" his classmates by "several orders of magnitude," and suggested with playful exaggeration that he seemed to excel in his studies "simply by looking over his books the night before the exam."⁵

On the strength of his BSc results, Magnusson was admitted in 1954 to doctoral studies in inorganic chemistry at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), securing a teaching post with the university along the way. Here he was able to work with the eminent Australian theoretical chemist David Parker Craig (1919–2015) and to publish joint papers with Craig.⁶ Two years later, on December 20, 1955, he married classmate Leonainie Tolhurst, the daughter of missionaries to Tonga, Hubert and Elsmer Tolhurst. Three sons were to be born into the family after the couple returned to Australia from an academic sojourn in the United Kingdom: Trevor, Roger, and Tony.

The completion of Eric's graduate studies in July 1957 earned him not only his Ph.D. but two scholarships (one from the Royal Society of Chemistry) and a British Council travel grant for postdoctoral research and lecturing at the Borough Polytechnic in Southwark, London (now London South Bank University).⁷ During this period he secured a further scholarship from the Royal Society of London, enabling him to complete a second Ph.D., this time in theoretical chemistry, with a dissertation entitled "Orbital Modification in Bond Formation" (1960), submitted to University College, London. This study enabled him to become a fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Chemistry (FRAIC) and the achievement of further publications with Craig.⁸ While in England,

Magnusson took a keen interest in the rapid advances taking place in molecular biology, recognizing the implications of the new information for theories of the origins of life. Although tempted to link up with the denomination's Newbold College west of London, Magnusson, loyal to his alma mater, kept in touch with Avondale's next principal, Edward E. White (also English-born) about returning to Australia, and in 1959 he had already "commenced collecting" needed science equipment.⁹ Following a further postdoctoral fellowship at Indiana University in the United States in early 1960, he returned to Cooranbong at the end of that year with a mandate to establish a new Science Department.¹⁰ It was a significant career change from advanced research in theoretical chemistry in richly equipped and endowed university environments to a rural college with limited scientific resources.

Science Department Chairman (1961–1970)

When Magnusson took up his leadership role in January 1961 under new principal Gordon McDowell, it was to help initiate and later preside over a period of unprecedented academic development. Magnusson was to help open doors for the college, enabling it to meet more effectively the increasing mission needs of the Church and the needs of its student population in a rapidly changing and very challenging educational environment in Australia. By 1969 the Australasian Division would be supporting 165 expatriates in its South Pacific mission, 65 of whom were in administration and 64 of whom were in education.¹¹ Magnusson, with his network of contacts in the public university system and his academic stature, helped the Church nurture a new relationship with government accreditation authorities and effectively interfaced with a changing educational policy context in the service of the broader Church.

During his first year on campus Magnusson began to explore the possibility of affiliating a science program with UNSW, but negotiations proceeded slowly. A breakthrough occurred in late 1961, when he was invited to accept a joint appointment as visiting lecturer at the University of Newcastle, which, according to McDowell, was the first time the university had requested the services of a lecturer "from outside government employment."¹² In addition to his teaching and administrative responsibilities at Avondale College, he continued to be involved in research and began to jointly supervise Ph.D. students at the University of Newcastle. This research work attracted substantial funding from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) and the Australian Research Grants Committee. He also took time to mentor and encourage other Avondale faculty in research.¹³

A program focused on preparing students for the London external BSc was relaunched in 1963 in parallel with continued approaches to UNSW.¹⁴ Within 12 months UNSW approved an affiliation that allowed students at Avondale to complete the first year of the UNSW BSc degree at Cooranbong commencing 1963. This latter development initially attracted only a few students (more were attracted to the London BSc), but the breakthrough with Magnusson's alma mater came with a hope that students might receive Australian

Commonwealth Government funding for such study.¹⁵ In 1964 Magnusson succeeded in being awarded a substantial research grant from CSIRO for a project he was working on with his science students.¹⁶ This was another important first for the institution and helped raise the profile of the quality of science teaching at Avondale.

With the prospect of science students able to receive commonwealth funding, Magnusson and McDowell persuaded the college board to introduce a three-year Avondale Diploma of Science with the curriculum modeled as an equivalent to the University of London's BSc degree. This was launched in 1967 and by 1975 had replaced the University of London program. Magnusson was able to announce with barely concealed excitement that the previous year there had been "scrutiny by officials from the prime minister's department," and that this had "resulted in recognition under the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme."¹⁷ Magnusson and his teaching colleagues, Draper and Thompson, took "delight" in the quality and the achievements of their new students. Bruce Lo, from Hong Kong, in 1967 achieved first-class honors in the London BSc program that enabled admission to graduate study in quantum mechanics at Monash University. Other students were successfully proceeding to their finals, five of whom also passed with honors.¹⁸ These successes soon led to the upgrading of other courses to three-year diplomas in teacher education and in commerce. Contemporaries saw Magnusson's "pivotal leadership" in the Science Department at this time as building the confidence of the Commonwealth Education Department in Avondale to obtain public academic recognition, "a rarity in Australia" at the time notes a later principal, Geoff Madigan.¹⁹ Magnusson saw the opportunities associated with the government's move in the late 1960s to recognize institutions such as Colleges of "Advanced Education" in the technical education sector as having a flow on to Avondale and with prescience and skill sought the benefit of similar recognition for Avondale as a liberal arts institution.²⁰

These developments were of enormous help to the college in the years to come, because, with eventual recognition of the broad range of its academic programs across all fields except theology, students were able to access tuition assistance from the Federal Government. Theology students benefited from Magnusson's science in other ways. For a decade he taught a course in the history and philosophy of science required for all senior theology students. His ability to discuss the complexities of a wide range of science and the challenges of the relationship between science and Christian faith in a responsible, sensitive, and faith-affirming way helped inform a generation of students, both on campus and off campus at camp meetings and other church gatherings.

College Principal (1971–1980)

When, in November 1970, Magnusson was appointed at age 38 to be the principal of the college, he was regarded by some as still rather youthful. Despite his "relative lack of" experience, however, observes college historian Milton Hook, Magnusson helped make the 1970s "one of the most vibrant periods in the history of the

college”—in retrospect, to be seen as “the golden years.”²¹ Enrollment expanded by more than 25 percent during the decade.

Magnusson was recognized as a gifted communicator able to make the complexities of science understandable and fun. He became a superb negotiator in the arena of government relations, with a mastery of educational policy that few others possessed and an insightful gospel preacher with a flair for imaginative metaphors. He was ordained to the gospel ministry on January 13, 1973, and would confide in close colleagues about the importance he placed on the pastoral dimensions of his role as college principal at a Christian institution.²² Magnusson wore his academic accomplishments lightly and unpretentiously, committed as he was to an egalitarian philosophy rooted in his Christian faith. He foreswore any kind of elitism and demurred from wearing academic regalia even on the most formal occasions, recalls his son Roger. For example, even when invited to give the formal address graduation, he preferred a plain business suit as a statement of his principles.²³

A major challenge of Magnusson’s tenure as principal was to direct the college’s response to the rapidly changing policy environment in Australia with the new opportunities it provided for growth and development. He succeeded in achieving Australian accreditation for the diploma programs and the BEd (science). These developments were necessary to meet the needs of the church’s rapidly expanding elementary and secondary school system, also being impacted by liberalized government policy with regard to funding and educational standards. As incredibly valuable as the PUC accreditation had been over the years, it was not understood and patchily recognized by universities in Australia and by none in New Zealand. Toward the end of the decade Magnusson oversaw the adoption of a state accredited, college based nursing program as government authorities insisted that modern nursing expectations could no longer appropriately be met in purely hospital based training programs. In the college’s first venture into graduate study he also nurtured the introduction of master’s-level theological studies in partnership with Andrews University, the denomination’s theological seminary in Michigan (USA). In the following decade, notes Geoff Madigan, successor principals building on the foundational work of Magnusson were able to upgrade the diploma programs to degrees.²⁴ By the end of 1974 the Australian context had so adjusted its relationship to private education that the Pacific Union College accreditation arrangements were no longer needed except for the theology degree, and that also gained state accreditation in 1990.

As Magnusson met these various challenges he also had to address the impact that rising academic expectations from both PUC and the government had on the distinctive ethos of the college. General education suffered and students felt under pressure to disengage with the work study program. His efforts to introduce “cultural studies” into the curriculum to maintain a broader scope of study to balance the sharper disciplinary focus characteristic of Australian degrees was a partial attempt to address this. A constituency-based initiative in 1975 to reintroduce a “blueprint” work-study plan sought to address the second issue. Initially highly subscribed to by students, it lasted three years before being phased out because of declining interest and an awareness that the general social and technological changes in the broader work place and education environment had

come to stay. Students were becoming more mobile, were choosing to live in the community, and this also pressured the work program and fragmented what had previously been a close-knit social cohesion among students on campus.

Despite financial pressures Magnusson oversaw a substantial building development program. His encouragement of links with Adventist business groups helped achieve early goals such as the expansion of the library (1972) and construction of a married student village (1974–1975).²⁵ Later in his tenure Magnusson worked closely with division treasurer, Lance Butler and Adventist business leader Lyn Knight to establish the Avondale College Foundation, an association of independent Adventist businesspeople committed to assisting the college financially. Funding from this new venture contributed toward developing facilities for the new flying school (1977), construction of the ladies (Ella Hughes) chapel (1978), construction of new chemistry and biochemistry laboratories, and the refurbishment of former elementary and secondary school buildings on campus to house the education, physics, biology, physiology, and nursing programs (1979).²⁶ The foundation also assisted with funds for faculty research and student scholarships

The most difficult problem of Magnusson's tenure as principal was the criticism from retired clergy and conservative, somewhat anti-intellectual laypeople who reacted negatively to the rising educational standards and lengthening courses at the college and the impact these had both on the patterns and content of learning. Much of the criticism focused on the Theology Department and its charismatic chair, Desmond Ford, who had become a lightning rod of dissent because of his widespread preaching on righteousness by faith. These troubles led to the transfer of Ford to PUC on a teaching exchange in 1977 and his eventual dismissal from college employment three years later. The Science Department also became a target for criticism because it at times addressed such issues as the inadequacies of Ussher's chronology in relationship to new data from geology, radiometric dating methods, and their implications for traditional time spans for life on earth.

Magnusson, along with other SDA scientists, struggled with how to present issues related to the interface of science and religion in a scientific yet faith-affirming way, that would provide resilience for Adventist students in their life journey.²⁷ George McCready Price (1870–1963) had long been the champion supporting a traditional biblical interpretation that life on earth was around six thousand years old (Ussher's chronology) and that the Noachian flood provided a fully adequate explanation for the geological column and the fossil record. Magnusson's research and his visits with scientists in Europe and the United States made him increasingly aware of the problems that radioactive dating techniques, plate tectonics, and phylogenetic relationships posed for the traditional interpretation of Scripture. An approach used by Magnusson and fellow Christian scientists to resolve these tensions was to focus on the concept of design in biosystems, as evidence of a Creator. He recognized, however, the limitations of this approach in the evolution versus-creation controversy, and thus employed apologetics and faith based responses to the new scientific findings.

The extent of the conservative backlash and severe theological ferment among the constituency by the end of the 1970s severely challenged senior church administrators. The only way they felt able to deal with the turmoil was to not renew Magnusson's appointment as president at the end of his term. This happened in August 1980. He was 47 years of age. Not seeing his way clear to accept a pastoral assignment, and his inability to take an overseas assignment because of family considerations, he was granted a two-year leave of absence. Robert Parr, the editor of the *Australasian Record*, was also replaced at this time in an attempt to deal with the ferment. The academic community at Avondale were deeply unsettled at the decision concerning Magnusson, for there seemed to be "no real reason" for his termination. Many felt that Magnusson had been treated unfairly, and saw his departure as "a considerable loss for the institution."²⁸

Research, Teaching, and Retirement (1980–2009)

In 1981 Magnusson returned to full-time scientific endeavor, securing an appointment as research fellow at the Australian National University, Research School of Chemistry, in Canberra, the nation's capital, on the strength of his earlier academic work, again working with his mentor David Craig.²⁹ In 1985 he reconnected with his old university and took up a teaching and research position at the UNSW-affiliated Australian Defense Force Academy (ADFA) campus in Canberra, where he taught for the next 15 years. During this time, in response to the miscarriage of justice in the case of Lindy Chamberlain, falsely convicted in October 1982 of murdering her baby at Uluru two years earlier, Magnusson developed a keen interest in the necessity of better education of criminal court jurors and the responsibilities of the courts to more adequately "equip jurors to assess expert opinion" and develop a proper understanding of the use of forensic science.³⁰ He not only published but also obtained research grants and supervised research students in this area.³¹ During these years Magnusson also gave considerable time to his wife's innovative children's drug education magazine, *One Jump Ahead*, for which she received public recognition in the awarding of a Medal of the Order of Australia while he was featured in the "Peoplescape" exhibitions on the lawns of Parliament house.

After serving for a time as acting head of school, Magnusson, now associate professor, was appointed head of the School of Science at UNSW, Canberra, in 2001, but later that year he resigned when his wife became terminally ill. Nainie died on December 17, 2001. Her medal of honor was presented posthumously to her husband by the governor-general, Major General (retired) Michael Jeffrey. After his retirement, Magnusson continued to be professionally involved in advanced scientific research at ADFA and in Sydney, where he served as chair of the Research Advisory Committee for the Australasian Research Institute (2004–2009), which was developed to serve the research needs of Avondale College, Adventist Health Care, Ltd., and the church's health food production enterprises. During this time he also spent significant time in the Cooranbong research laboratories on joint projects with former colleagues Geoff Madigan, Bob Drewer, and Robert Hosken, using gas chromatography-mass-spectrometry (GC-MS) to research "soy flavor chemicals" for the health food industry in an effort to improve the taste of Soy beverage So Good and other products.³² He also continued to serve

Avondale for a five-year term as a member of its governing body and at various other times as chair of accreditation committees. He assumed the role of acting academic vice president for a semester at the end of 2003, when John Cox became president following the retirement of Madigan, and continued in his role as visiting science lecturer.

Following his retirement, Magnusson married Jane Lawson in July 2005 and settled for a time in South Queensland, later moving to Koolewong, overlooking Brisbane Waters on the New South Wales Central Coast, which enabled him to continue to teach in retirement as a visiting fellow at ADFA and occasionally at Avondale. On August 31, 2009, at age 76, he unexpectedly suffered a fatal heart attack. Memorial services were held in the Avondale College church and his remains interred at the Avondale Memorial Cemetery in Cooranbong.

Contribution

Eric Magnusson's two-decades-long contribution to Avondale College came at a time of rapid and far-reaching change in government policy in the tertiary education sector in Australia. His academic preparation, his wide network of professional colleagues, and his vision for Adventist education at Avondale enabled the college to respond successfully to the rising educational expectations and opportunities, and he led the college through a period of unprecedented and important academic development. He achieved this by recruiting highly qualified academic staff, securing funding for their advanced education where needed, and overseeing needed curriculum and facility development to meet the rising standards and networking with external educational officials and politicians. The academic recognition achieved during Magnusson's administration provided enormous benefit to the church in the South Pacific through its increased ability to resource its growing elementary and secondary educational program both in the mission field and in the homeland conferences. Avondale students were benefited through being able to graduate with recognized academic awards that met rising government and professional body standards, which greatly facilitated employment opportunities both in the church and public sector and enabled them to progress seamlessly into graduate programs at public universities.

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17. Magnusson, "Science at Avondale."

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21. Hook, 276,
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24. Geoffrey Madigan, email to author, March 24, 2019.
25. Hook, 282–288.
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