



William Gordon Turner, c. 1920.

Photo courtesy of South Pacific Division Heritage Centre.

## Turner, William Gordon (1885–1978)

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### MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*,

*Avondale: Experiment on the Dora, Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

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William Gordon Turner was an Adventist pastor and administrator who held numerous administrative positions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He served as president of the Australasian Division based in Sydney, and also a vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists based in Washington, D.C.

## Early Years

William Gordon Turner, popularly known as Gordon, was born in Melbourne, Victoria, on July 6, 1885, to William and Ellen (Hurcomb) Turner.<sup>1</sup> He had one younger sibling, Sarah Dorothy.<sup>2</sup> In 1901, he enrolled in Bradshaw's Business College, Melbourne, to study bookkeeping and office procedures for two years.<sup>3</sup> As a teenager, he was baptized into the Baptist Church.<sup>4</sup>

Turner's parents moved to New Zealand where he joined them and found employment for two years as a bookkeeper for Smith and Smith, Ltd., glass and paint merchants in Wellington.<sup>5</sup> About 1905, his father, who was a draper, took the extraordinary step of sending Turner to England to gain some experience in the trade. He worked in two separate businesses until mid-1907. One was with Brian Morris, a general draper and silk merchant, in Weymouth, Dorset.<sup>6</sup> Another was in the dress department and cashier's office of Barton Warehouses in Bristol.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to New Zealand, Gordon Turner united with his father in a retail business in Hastings under the name W. Turner and Son. Their newspaper advertising offered high quality drapery, rust-proof corsets, bloomers, muslin, embroideries and insertions, towels, and children's dolls and toys.<sup>8</sup>

## A Change of Direction

About 1911, Turner received hydrotherapy treatments from Robert and Mary Judge, graduates of the Sydney Sanitarium nursing program.<sup>9</sup> In the course of a conversation about the Bible, the nurses captured his interest with an explanation of Daniel's vision of the metallic image. He shared the revelation with two of his young friends, Arthur and Frank Knight. The three young men visited the local Seventh-day Adventist church, a small group of approximately fifteen adults. Their unannounced entrance caused quite a sensation.<sup>10</sup> The trio eventually joined the church.

The Greenfield family lived opposite the Adventist church in Hastings. The female members of the family were members of the church. A most eligible bachelor-dapper, meticulously organized, and always immaculately dressed—at twenty-seven-years old, Turner began a friendship with one of the Greenfield daughters, raven-haired Mabel Greenfield.<sup>11</sup> But plans for marriage were postponed when Turner set off for the Australasian Missionary College in Australia to enroll in the two-year missionary course and Mabel Greenfield entered the

nursing class at the Sydney Sanitarium. The move surely caused Turner's parents some mixed emotions.

Turner graduated from the missionary course in the 1914<sup>12</sup> and proceeded to an appointment in the Victorian Conference. Mabel Greenfield decided to withdraw from the nursing class and join Turner in Victoria. They returned to Hastings for their wedding in the Greenfield home on May 20, 1915, and then settled in Victoria.<sup>13</sup>

## Rapid Succession of Increasing Responsibilities

Rarely has a man moved so quickly to heavy responsibilities in the church. Turner worked in the Victorian Conference for only two years<sup>14</sup> before being appointed to Australasian Union Conference headquarters as assistant in the Home Missions department in late 1916.<sup>15</sup> His responsibilities included the promotion of denominational periodicals among the church membership.<sup>16</sup> Turner was ordained to the ministry at a special prayer meeting on Wednesday evening, September 5, 1917, in the Wahroonga church.<sup>17</sup>

Following his ordination, Turner served for forty years in various executive positions. From 1918 to 1919, he was the president, Home Missions secretary, and education superintendent of the South Australian Conference.<sup>18</sup> He was then recalled to headquarters to be the general secretary of the Australasian Union Conference, from 1920 through 1926.<sup>19</sup> Two years were spent as president of the Victorian Conference, 1927 and 1928,<sup>20</sup> one year as president of the Queensland Conference, 1929,<sup>21</sup> and another year as president of the North New Zealand Conference, 1930.<sup>22</sup> He returned to the Australasian Union Conference office as president during the Great Depression and guided affairs for five difficult years, 1931 through 1935.<sup>23</sup> In one of his annual reports during this period he highlighted advances made in radio evangelism and the financial assistance given by the Sanitarium Health Food Company for the building of new churches throughout Australasia.<sup>24</sup>

Turner attended the 1936 General Conference Session in San Francisco where he was elected to be one of sixteen vice presidents of the General Conference<sup>25</sup> and one of three general vice presidents.<sup>26</sup> He returned to Australia and made his claim to orthodoxy at the Australasian Union Conference Session in Melbourne, denouncing modernism and commending a Baptist minister for upholding a literal view of Genesis 1.<sup>27</sup> The Turner family, including children Raymond and Joy, sailed from Sydney aboard the *Orontes* on November 21 destined for New York via the Suez Canal.<sup>28</sup>

At the beginning of Turner's tenure at the General Conference, he was entrusted with the responsibility of being Australasia's representative, and in 1941 he took on the larger role of representative for the North American Division.<sup>29</sup> The following year, 1942, he was elected chairman of the Voice of Prophecy Board,<sup>30</sup> no doubt benefiting from his past experience with radio evangelism in Australasia.<sup>31</sup>

In 1946, Turner returned to Australia when he was appointed secretary of the Australasian Union Conference,<sup>32</sup> followed by a brief term as president in 1948,<sup>33</sup> and field secretary in 1949.<sup>34</sup> He officially retired that same year, but remained on the executive committee until 1958.<sup>35</sup> In the meantime, he also pastored the churches at Port

Macquarie and Toronto,<sup>36</sup> and did some press relations work for the North New South Wales Conference from 1954 through 1958.<sup>37</sup>

In full retirement, Gordon and Mabel Turner settled at Cooranbong, New South Wales, to be near their daughter. Mabel Turner suffered from arthritis and was eventually admitted to the Charles Harrison Memorial Nursing Home where she died on January 6, 1977.<sup>38</sup> Gordon Turner died in the same place on October 26, 1978.<sup>39</sup> He preached his last sermon only six weeks before his death.<sup>40</sup>

The humble Hastings nurses could hardly have guessed the chain of events that would evolve from a discussion of Daniel 2 back in 1911. It seeded the makings of a dedicated world leader in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

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