

# Robinson, Asa Theron (1850–1949)

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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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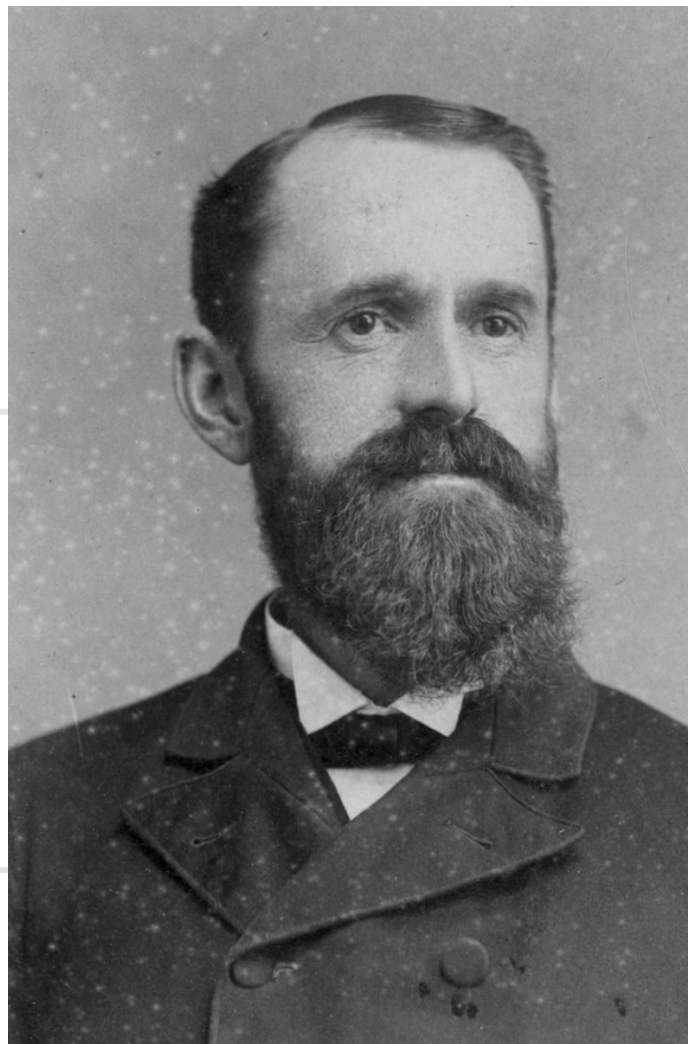
Asa T. Robinson served as an evangelist and administrator in the United States and Australia and led out in organizing the Adventist work in South Africa.

## Early Life

Asa Theron Robinson was born on August 22, 1850, in Lower Brighton, New Brunswick, Canada, and raised in the Baptist faith.<sup>1</sup> His parents, Asa and Eliza (Brewer) Robinson, had four older children: Joseph, Francis, Issichar and Dores Alonzo.<sup>2</sup>

When Asa was twenty years of age, he heard that his brother, Dores, had begun observing the Saturday Sabbath where he was working at Cornish Flat, New Hampshire. Asa set out to show Dores the error of his ways but was, in turn, convinced Dores had found the right path.<sup>3</sup>

Asa remained in New Hampshire and took up farming. He married Loretta Viola Farnsworth on September 28, 1876, in Washington, Sullivan County, New Hampshire.<sup>4</sup> In 1877 they were blessed with twin sons, Erban and William but William did not survive infancy. Another son, named after Asa's brother Dores, was born in 1879.<sup>5</sup>



A.T. Robinson, c. 1890.

Photo courtesy of Loma Linda University Photo Archive; Dept. of Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University.

## Ministry and Leadership in the United States

In 1881 Robinson and his family moved to Westerly, Rhode Island, where he worked as a mechanic and carpenter. The following year he began canvassing denominational books, being one of the first to venture into this type of evangelism. After a few months Stephen N. Haskell, president of the New England Conference, invited him and Loretta to assist with a public evangelistic campaign in Worcester, Massachusetts, by giving Bible studies to attendees. Later, Asa conducted his own evangelistic meetings in New Bedford and Boston, Massachusetts and in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>6</sup>

Robinson was ordained in 1886 and replaced Haskell as president of the New England Conference in 1888.<sup>7</sup> At the 1889 General Conference he was elected to the General Conference Executive Committee and as a member of the Book Committee and the executive board of the International Tract Society.<sup>8</sup> The 1889 General Conference divided North America into six administrative districts with an executive committee member designated for each as superintendent. Robinson was assigned District 1, comprised of the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states and eastern Canada. His role as district superintendent was not executive leadership but rather to represent the General Conference to his district, communicating pertinent information and decisions and monitoring new developments, trends, and problems to report to executive committee.<sup>9</sup>

## Initiatives in South Africa

In 1891 Robinson was appointed superintendent of the South African mission. The three established churches in the territory were Cape Town, Wynberg in south Cape Town and Beaconsfield near the Kimberley diamond mine. He and his family sailed into Cape Town on January 2, 1892, after a stormy trip from England. Robinson noted that the question of a mission school was the top issue in the minds of the members.<sup>10</sup> One of his first projects, therefore, was to establish an elementary school at Beaconsfield, Sarah Peck acting as the mission teacher. Hettie Hurd and Hiva Starr were enlisted to hold Bible studies and colporteurs began work in the districts.

Robinson's central task was to organize the South African mission field into a conference. In the United States by this time several organizations such as the Tract and Missionary Society, Sabbath School Association, American Health and Temperance Association, and the new Religious Liberty Association functioned alongside of the conferences but were not under conference management. Robinson believed the church's work in South Africa was too small to follow the plan of operating these associations and societies parallel to the conference. Instead he set up departments within the conference administrative structure to carry the out functions that the auxiliary organizations fulfilled elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

General Conference president O. A. Olsen was sceptical about the plan but by the time his letter warning against it arrived the system was already up and running smoothly and thus was continued. Robinson's initiative set a

precedent for the major church reorganization set in motion at the 1901 General Conference.<sup>12</sup>

Major institutions were initiated during Robinson's mission term. One was the Matabele (later Solusi) mission station, located fifty kilometres southwest of Bulawayo. Robinson was one who talked to Cecil Rhodes, the British magnate and empire builder, about plans for the betterment of the Matabele people. Rhodes generously allocated a vast tract of land which, from 1894, was developed into a self-supporting industrial school.<sup>13</sup> Another project was the 1897 opening of the Claremont Sanitarium.<sup>14</sup> Helderburg College was opened in 1893 in Cape Town. An orphanage was also founded. The periodical *Sentinel De Wachter* was inaugurated and several tracts and books in the Dutch language were translated and printed.<sup>15</sup>

## Varied Roles in Australia

After almost six years developing the Adventist work in South Africa, A. T. Robinson was called to Australia, where he and his family, now also including daughter Gladys Evora (born 1892),<sup>16</sup> arrived on October 10, 1897.<sup>17</sup>

In Australia Robinson was given various assignments, fitting in wherever there was a need. For this reason he was listed as a delegate-at-large at the 1899 Australasian Union Conference (AUC) session.<sup>18</sup> Immediately after his arrival he gave the Medical Missionary report at the AUC session even though he was not the appointed secretary.<sup>19</sup> He then went to minister in Tasmania during much of 1898<sup>20</sup> and later featured as a speaker at the camp meetings in Ballarat, Victoria,<sup>21</sup> and West Maitland, New South Wales.<sup>22</sup> He cared for the Dunedin district in New Zealand throughout 1902.<sup>23</sup> In the meantime, 1900 and 1901, he lectured in religious history and Bible at the Avondale School for Christian Workers, Cooranbong, New South Wales.<sup>24</sup>

## New Leadership Roles in America

The Robinsons sailed back to America, arriving at San Francisco on March 3, 1903, to spend considerable time in administrative ministry.<sup>25</sup> Within weeks of his arrival, Robinson was appointed president of the Nebraska Conference, a role he held until 1910.<sup>26</sup> For three years, 1911 through 1913, he served as vice-president of the Central Union Conference.<sup>27</sup> During 1914 through 1916 he was president of the Colorado Conference<sup>28</sup> followed by twelve months as Home Missions secretary in the same conference. For the same period daughter Gladys served as education secretary.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Robinson returned to his familiar home territory as president of the Southern New England Conference, 1918 through 1920.<sup>30</sup> He concluded his active ministry as chaplain of the New England Sanitarium and Hospital, Melrose, Massachusetts, working until 1929 when he turned eighty years of age.<sup>31</sup>

## Final Years

Asa and Loretta retired to Angwin, California. Loretta passed away on August 13, 1933.<sup>32</sup> After Loretta's death Asa lived with daughter and son-in-law, Gladys and Joseph Stearns in St. Helena, California. Robinson preached his last sermon when he was ninety-five, a discourse titled "The Blessed Hope." He wanted to see the milestone of being a centenarian and came close. He passed away peacefully at age 99 on November 8, 1949 and was laid to rest alongside Loretta in the Saint Helena Cemetery.<sup>33</sup>

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