



Messenger built on Pitcairn Island by Richard Adams and Pitcairn Islanders, launched in 1917.

Photo courtesy of Colin Richardson.

Adams, Richard Melville (1880–1931) and Miriam (Currow) (1880–1965)

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Richard and Miriam Adams commenced their married lives as early missionaries on Pitcairn Island. After five years on Pitcairn they spent nine years in self-supporting medical ministry on Norfolk Island.

Early Life

Richard Melville Adams was born in 1880 at Chewton (near Bendigo), Victoria, the son of Richard and Elizabeth (Speirs) Adams.¹ Birth records indicate that his Christian name was Richard Melville. However, later in life he was more often referred to as Melville Richard, and the initials “M. R.” appear in print beside his surname. He became a Seventh-day Adventist in his early 20s and caught a vision for medical missionary work. In order to prepare himself for service and to accumulate funds for his education, he engaged in literature evangelism in 1908 and 1909 in Western Australia. He sold books such as *Home Hand-Book*, *Daniel and Revelation*, and *Seer of Patmos* in Busselton, Meckering, Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, and Katanning. In 1910 he entered the nursing class at the Sydney Sanitarium, graduating three years later, on October 31, 1912.² Among the eight graduates in 1912 were two male nurses. Both Melville Adams and Oscar Hellestrand were to make very significant contributions to the missionary enterprise of the Church in the South Pacific.

Miriam (Minnie) Currow was born in 1880 in Queenscliff, Victoria, 1 of 13 children born to Salvatore (1827–1910), son of Antonio and Theresa Currow, and Caroline Elizabeth (Wayth), (1847–1930), daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth Caroline Wayth.³ Three of Salvatore and Caroline’s children became Seventh-day Adventists: Louis, Arthur, and Miriam. All three became missionaries in the South Pacific. Arthur was to be the first Australian Adventist missionary to Fiji, Louis the first self-supporting missionary to Fiji, and Miriam the first Australian married woman to Pitcairn and later Norfolk Island.

Soon after becoming a Seventh-day Adventist, Miriam was invited by Ellen White to live in her home at Cooranbong.⁴ In a letter written in 1957, Miriam recalls, “I was still a girl in my teens when I chose to follow in the footsteps of my Saviour. I loved His word and through reading and meditation of God’s word, I became convinced of the Sabbath truth. . . . Sister White requested an appointment with me, and assured me of her help and protection. She was responsible for my travelling expenses and for my support. On arriving at her home in Avondale, I was assigned light duties, and given the privilege of attending the A.M.C. [Avondale] at her expense as an outdoor student. She was kind and considerate in every way, taking the keenest interest in my welfare and advising even in the matter of suitable clothing.”⁵

While attending Avondale, Miriam worked for a time as a literature evangelist in Singleton.⁶ She also worked with her older brother Louis and his wife, Lizzie, in the Hamilton (Newcastle) treatment rooms, awakening her interest in health and healing. In 1909 she sought further credentials to engage in healing ministry and enrolled in the nurses training school at the Sydney Sanitarium. She graduated three years later in 1911.

Marriage and Service

Melville Adams and Miriam Currow met while they were nursing students. They were married in the sanitarium parlor by Pastor A. H. Piper on November 26, 1912.⁷ Two months before their marriage, Richard had been appointed to Lord Howe Island.⁸ However, shortly before their marriage, they were reassigned to Pitcairn Island.⁹

The Adamses sailed for Tahiti on December 28, 1912, on the RMS *Aorangi* without any idea how they were going to find passage from Tahiti to lonely Pitcairn.¹⁰ Consequently, they were obliged to spend eight months in Tahiti waiting for a ship to carry them to Pitcairn, a distance of more than 1,300 miles. While in Tahiti, they kept busy. Pastor Frank Lyndon, leader of the church in Tahiti, expressed appreciation for the work of the Adamses while they were awaiting passage to Pitcairn. "At present they are selling our native books and circulating our literature about, and treating the sick. . . . We shall be sorry to lose Brother and Sister Adams when a ship sails for Pitcairn Island."¹¹

They left Makatea, Tahiti, on August 9, 1913, on the *Hamstead*, a cargo boat bound for Europe with phosphates on board.¹² After a very rough passage, they arrived on Pitcairn on August 28, 1913. Miriam found the trip particularly challenging, being seven months pregnant with their first son, Paul, at the time.

On Pitcairn they found 165 inhabitants comprising 37 families.¹³ Sabbath School membership was 156.¹⁴ About 60 attended the church school.¹⁵ Just eight weeks after the Adamses arrived on the island, there was a baptism of 13.¹⁶ Miriam reported that it had been 10 years since there had been a baptism on Pitcairn.¹⁷

Melville and Miriam Adams soon won the respect of the people of Pitcairn. John McCoy reported that "brother and sister Adams have won the love and confidence of all on the island."¹⁸ The respect was mutual. Miriam wrote, "The people here have original ways of doing things. In tithing their produce they count off all the trees, cocoanuts [*sic*] and oranges and every tenth one they call the Lord's; every tenth row of potatoes, of corn, and of pineapples, is the Lord's; when they go fishing every tenth fish is the Lord's."¹⁹

Nevertheless, the Adamses did feel the isolation of living on Pitcairn and were glad for correspondence from home. Miriam wrote, "We received two letters from you, Sister Hindson, dated December 8, 1913, and December 22, 1913, on the steamer *Knight Templar*, the same boat on which Brother McCoy travelled to Sydney. Although the letters were then eight months old, they were very refreshing to us, and we read parts of them in our missionary meetings."²⁰

Life was certainly not boring, however. Miriam wrote that "Mr Adams is kept quite busy with his school work, and is enjoying it very much. He is also planning to have a night school for the purpose of helping some of the young men who can scarcely read or write. In addition to this we are planning for classes on first aid and bandaging. If we could get a supply of needles and thread, also wool, I should like to teach the girls sewing and knitting. . . . He also conducts a class two evenings in each week for the benefit of the young people who desire to study the Bible and fit themselves for usefulness in the Lord's work."²¹ The Bible study class resulted in another 14 young people being baptized on March 27, 1915.²²

It was Pitcairn's isolation that led to a decision in 1915 to build a vessel to "take . . . tithe produce to market . . . as a missionary enterprise."²³ The boat was to be built by the islanders themselves using what materials were available on the island. Suffice to say, tools, building materials, and timber were scarce.²⁴ Reflecting on the experience many years later, Miriam observed that "there were only two hammers and one saw on the island

apart from the cross-cut saw.” She also commented that “one day I was searching for my stove poker, only to discover it had been converted into nails.”²⁵

After 13 months of arduous work, the vessel of 44 feet was launched. It was aptly named *Messenger*.²⁶ Almost immediately it set sail for Mangareva in the Gambier group of islands and then on to Tahiti with 10 to 15 men on board (reports vary), including Melville Adams.²⁷ The trip was particularly trying. While it took only 4 days to reach Mangareva, it was to take another 30 days to reach Tahiti.²⁸ The winds were so strong and contrary that the ship’s captain reported that “we were obliged to tack twenty-one days” and “we were blown back 300 miles.”²⁹

The ship remained in Tahiti until May 4, when, after one aborted attempt to leave, it set sail for Pitcairn with 19 people on board, including Melville Adams and 3 children.³⁰ Much to the relief of the families who had remained on Pitcairn, they arrived back in Pitcairn on June 4, 1917—four and a half months after leaving.³¹ *Messenger* was to make a number of trips between Pitcairn and Tahiti until 1920, when she eventually became unseaworthy and was scuttled.

While Melville Adams had been in Tahiti, a decision was made that the Adams family would relocate from Pitcairn to Mangareva. The rationale for the decision was that Melville could “oversee the work at Pitcairn, and come in touch with many of the small nearby islands . . . and do aggressive work in the Austral Group, which is situated farther to the south.”³²

Thus, after more than four years on Pitcairn, Melville and Miriam Adams left for New Zealand on October 24, 1917, in order to get to Tahiti.³³ The work on Pitcairn was continued by Fred Christian, and the school was cared for by Walter Young, both Pitcairn Islanders.³⁴ After a short stay in New Zealand, they arrived in Papeete, Tahiti, on February 27, 1918.³⁵ The plan was that they stay on the island of Huahine in order to learn the Tahitian language.³⁶ However, ill health intervened, and they returned to Sydney, arriving on July 2, 1918.³⁷ They had been in Tahiti for just four months.

At the Australasian Union session held at Cooranbong, New South Wales, October 2–16, 1918, Melville Adams was appointed to the Sanitarium Health Food Factory in Cooranbong.³⁸ He did not remain there for long. In October the following year, he and Miriam were on their way to Norfolk Island. The *Australasian Record* reported that “their hearts are in the mission field, and we are pleased to know that Sister Adams’ health is now sufficiently established to permit them to again take up work in the islands.”³⁹ However, they were to be self-supporting.

The Adams family set sail for Norfolk Island on the *Makamba* on October 14, 1919.⁴⁰ A second son, Milton, had just been born.⁴¹

As self-supporting workers, Melville and Miriam immediately set up treatment rooms and began to engage in both a spiritual and physical healing ministry, for which they were well equipped both in qualifications and experience. They also purchased 24 acres, on which they had horses and dairy cattle. After three years they sold

this property and purchased 12 acres closer to the town and were able to open treatment rooms in a more central location.⁴² They were able to accommodate indoor and outdoor patients at these rooms.⁴³ They also continued to care for the work of the church on the island. Insofar as many of the church members were themselves originally from Pitcairn, their experience stood them in good stead.

Their efforts met with success. A number of baptisms were reported as a result of their work.⁴⁴ However, the years in the Pacific were taking their toll, and both Miriam and Melville were compelled to return to Sydney because of illness. In 1928, having gone to the Sydney Sanitarium in order to recover, Melville was advised not to return to Norfolk.⁴⁵ He spent 10 months at Hazelbrook in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales.⁴⁶ Miriam and the boys left Norfolk to join him on November 22, 1928.⁴⁷

Later Life

The Adamses moved back to Victoria, closer to their family. However, Melville's health continued to deteriorate, and he died in July 1931.⁴⁸ A memorial service for him was conducted on Norfolk Island.⁴⁹ He was buried on July 30, 1931, in the White Hills Cemetery, Bendigo, Victoria.

In a letter written from Papeete on April 8, 1917, just before leaving Tahiti to travel back to Pitcairn on the *Messenger*, Melville Adams had written: "One can hardly realize how far one drops behind the times, and how much one loses by being isolated for three or four years. But I do not complain if my loss is somebody's gain, and I am willing to spend and be spent if I can only be instrumental in pointing some soul to the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world."⁵⁰

His words proved to be prophetic. He died before his time.

After Melville's death, Miriam moved back to Cooranbong. She lived there until her death at 85 in April 1965. She was buried on April 25, 1965, in the Avondale cemetery beside her son Milton. Of her, it was written that "her works of love and her example of steadfastness and joy 'do follow her."⁵¹

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