

# Caro, Margaret (Malcolm) (1848–1938)

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## LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

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Margaret Caro was the first registered woman dentist in New Zealand and supported the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church by assisting with the program at the New Zealand Training School and serving as a Bible worker.

## Early Life, Marriage, and Career

Margaret Malcolm was born in Nelson, New Zealand, on December 17, 1848, the youngest of five children born into the Presbyterian family of Margaret (Barrie) Malcolm and her husband, Andrew, who were recent emigrants from Scotland. By trade, Andrew Malcolm was a wheelwright. Margaret was educated in Nelson, New Zealand, at a school for young ladies.

In 1864, Margaret, at 16 years old, married 32-year-old James Selig Siegfried Caro, commonly known as Jacob. A Polish Jew, Jacob trained as a physician in Berlin and then Melbourne before settling in New Zealand. For the next 16 years, the Caros lived and worked together in isolated mining and farming communities in the South Island of New Zealand. There the two of them set bones, gave dental treatments, and sewed up wounds. Over six feet tall, Margaret was known for her strength, which enabled her to extract teeth quickly and skilfully. An excellent horsewoman, she rode long distances to provide treatment. Between 1869 and 1876, she gave birth to



Margaret Caro

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

three sons.<sup>1</sup> Jacob was naturalized in Havelock in November of 1875, and he is notable as the first physician in New Zealand authorized to administer vaccinations.<sup>2</sup>

In 1881 Margaret Caro became the first registered woman dentist in New Zealand. By then the family had settled in Napier on the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand, where she set up her own dental practice, which she continued until 1910. Margaret was the only woman to attend the first conference of the New Zealand Dental Association held in Dunedin in 1890, at which time she supported a proposed registration and qualification system for dentists.<sup>3</sup>

Margaret's own qualifications and training for dentistry are unknown, and it may well be that she was "grandfathered" into the profession at the time registration requirements were first established in New Zealand, something not unusual in the medical and allied health professions in the 19th century. One family descendent believes she had no formal qualifications for dentistry.<sup>4</sup> However, registration gave Margaret the privilege of using the honorarium of "Doctor."<sup>5</sup>

## Adventism and Health Reform

In 1888 a young American evangelist, Arthur Grosvenor Daniells, came to Napier and ran an evangelistic series. The teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church were congruent with many of Margaret's views, and she appreciated the progressive views of the Church at the time toward women. She believed SDA teachings on health and healing were rational. Thus she became a Seventh-day Adventist, and while her husband, Jacob, was always cordial to her new friends, he did not then join the Church.

Margaret soon began to write and lecture on "food reform." She maintained that a vegetarian diet was a natural and healthy practice, and her experience in visiting slaughterhouses and inspecting carcasses to ensure that none that were tubercular were being sold to the public underpinned her convictions.<sup>6</sup> Margaret was also strongly influenced by one of the three founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ellen White, who spent most of the 10 years before 1900 living in Australia and New Zealand. Ellen White was later to become a valued friend and colleague of Margaret, and they worked well together.

Between 1880 and 1888 Margaret's eldest son, Percy, was a student at Nelson College. He received three scholarships there, and after finishing secondary school, he was accepted into Cambridge University in the United Kingdom to read law. In 1889, Margaret's two other sons, Edgar and Eric, became the first New Zealand Seventh-day Adventists to attend Battle Creek College in Michigan, United States of America.<sup>7</sup> In 1894 Edgar graduated from the University of Michigan as a physician with an M.D. degree, and Eric qualified as a dentist. In 1893, Percy completed his legal studies.<sup>8</sup> On his way back to New Zealand, he stopped in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to visit his two brothers. While there, on April 9, 1894, he died after a short illness at the age of 24.

In July 1893, Ellen White arranged for Margaret Caro to take the 10-hour train trip from Napier to Wellington and there extract her eight remaining teeth, some of which were abscessed. Ellen White in her account of the experience noted that Dr. Caro had found the experience difficult and needed to rest and recover after it was all over, so the patient went into the kitchen and prepared something for her dentist to eat. For her part, Margaret Caro dreaded the prospect of removing Ellen White's teeth. The thought of causing pain to someone she had so much respect for and the reality that Ellen White reacted badly to the anesthetics of the time meant the procedure had to be done without any pain relief, hence the stress on the dentist as well as the patient.<sup>9</sup>

In September 1893, women's suffrage was granted in New Zealand, the first country in the world to give women the right to vote, and this pleased the reform-minded Margaret Caro, who not only believed in the extension of the franchise to women but also supported the reforms promoted by the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Association.

In 1894, Jacob Caro took his stand for Christ, but it was "only after years of careful investigation that he was finally led to accept the Saviour he had once lightly esteemed."<sup>10</sup> In 1895 Jacob Caro traveled to Europe and, as part of his travel, stopped in Michigan to visit his sons and the grave of his eldest son, who had died there the year before. It was reported that "Bro. Caro received baptism here last Sabbath, and finds peace in believing in his Saviour."<sup>11</sup>

Always reform-minded, Margaret Caro took alcoholics into her home in early 1898. Very much because of her leadership, the Christian Help band of the Napier church opened the Bethany Home for "released female prisoners and the fallen."<sup>12</sup> The local church ran this program until 1914, when it was given to the Salvation Army, which ran it until closure in 1938. Margaret took an interest in the Maori people of New Zealand and, with the assistance of Ellen White, helped one young man study medicine with the famous Dr. John Harvey Kellogg in Battle Creek. This young man was the first among the Maori people to ever qualify as a physician, and while he soon left the Church on his return to New Zealand, for decades Sir Māui Pōmare was an enormous force for good as a member of the national Parliament and minister for health in successive New Zealand governments.

Dr. Jacob Caro died on October 25, 1902, and is buried in Napier with a handsome headstone to mark the spot. Shortly after, their son Edgar's marriage failed, and his wife wanted to return, with the children, to her American homeland. Dr. Margaret accompanied her daughter-in-law on the voyage while hoping a reconciliation could be effected, something that never eventuated. Margaret and her son's family resided in a small cottage behind Ellen White's "Elmshaven" home for a year, and Margaret took some classes during that time because she was interested in becoming a Bible worker.

On her return to New Zealand, Margaret took up dentistry again until around 1910, when she closed her practice. The income from her practice is thought by her family to have been of significant support for the education of her and Jacob's three sons.

## Bible Work

From 1910 Dr. Margaret assisted with the program at the New Zealand Training School (now Longburn College) and later did some Bible work in Wellington.

Some years later Margaret attended Avondale College in Australia, taking classes from W. W. Prescott, who was principal during 1921–1922. She was in her mid 70s by then and, for a time following her year at Avondale, was employed as a Bible worker in the North New South Wales Conference.<sup>13</sup> After a brief illness, she returned to New Zealand and was involved in Christian prison work and lived mostly in Napier until 1936, when she moved to Wellington and into the care of her dentist son, Eric, until her death at the age of 90 in 1938.<sup>14</sup>

## Legacy

Margaret Caro was unusual among New Zealand middle-class women reformers of her time in that during her married life she worked continually and with financial success in a male dominated occupation. Her achievement was due in part to her personality, which according to a contemporary, combined the “cordial manner of the colonial . . . with the solidity of character so characteristic of the Scotch nation.”<sup>15</sup>

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### NOTES

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Pip Griffin, "Timeline for Margaret Caro and Family, 14 September, 2016," unpublished manuscript held in the Ellen G. White Adventist Research Centre, DF 133f. Pip Griffin is a great niece of Margaret Caro.
5. Margaret Caro was registered as a doctor of dentistry, June 13, 1881, Dentist's Register of New Zealand (*New Zealand Gazette*, January 26, 1882, 162).
6. Griffin, "Timeline."
7. Griffin, "Timeline."
8. G. T. Wilson, "New Zealand," *The Bible Echo*, September 10, 1894, 286.
9. Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983), 98.
10. Wilson, "New Zealand."
11. G. C. Tenney, "From America," *The Bible Echo*, November 12, 1894, 350.
12. Sydney Ross Goldstone, *Veneered Infidelity: The Story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hawke's Bay, 1888–1932* (Napier, N.Z.: Daily Telegraph Co., 1979), 61.
13. P. Glockler, "Mrs. M. Caro obituary," *Australasian Record*, June 20, 1938, 7.
14. Kaori cemetery, Wellington, New Zealand, Church of England Section, plot 3342, record number 68148, no headstone.
15. Ormsby, "Caro, Margaret."

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