

# Palmer, Cyril Stewart (1893–1976) and Dora Lilian (Burns) (1898–1980)

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Shirley Tarburton, M.Litt. (Distinction) (University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia) retired in 2008 after 40 years teaching church-school (mainly high school but including eight years at university). An Australian, she has taught in four mission fields, Australia, and New Zealand. She has authored five books and co-authored one on church history, biography and family history, as well as several magazine articles. She is married to Dr. Michael Tarburton with two adult children and four grandchildren.



Cyril and Dora Palmer with children.

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

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Cyril Stewart Palmer was a teacher, principal, minister, missionary, and administrator in the Australasian (now South Pacific) Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for forty-two years.<sup>1</sup>

## Early Life

Cyril Stewart Palmer was born on February 16, 1893, in Tonga<sup>2</sup> where his father ran a trading station in the Ha'api group.<sup>3</sup> He was the eldest of the three children of his parents, William Walter Palmer (1871-1949)<sup>4</sup> and his wife, Alice Maud Mary née Bell (1863-1956).<sup>5</sup> His siblings were Louis William (1896-1990),<sup>6</sup> and Evelyn May (later Kent, 1899-1959<sup>7</sup>). There is mention of another sister<sup>8</sup> but no further information has been found.

Palmer spent his early years on his father's trading station in Ha'api. When he was considered old enough, he was often permitted to sail with his uncle, William Ross, on his trading vessel, the *Ysabel*, to various parts of the Tongan group.<sup>9</sup>

## Conversion

In 1898, the Adventist missionary ship, *Pitcairn*, visited Palmer's trading station and missionaries Hilliard and Butz held a meeting in the Palmers' home to which the neighbors were invited. When they continued their journey the next day, they left some Adventist books and magazines with the Palmers, which Alice Palmer avidly read.<sup>10</sup> William Palmer was not interested until some months later when, on a business visit to Nuku'alofa, he was invited to a meal at the Butz's home. This was followed by frequent visits during his stay in the capital, and when he returned to his station, he was a converted man.<sup>11</sup> Both of Cyril Palmer's parents were baptized in 1899<sup>12</sup> and their children were raised as Seventh-day Adventists.

## Education

Cyril Palmer learned to read at a young age and enjoyed reading the literature that the *Pitcairn* left with his family. Upon learning of an Adventist elementary school at Avondale, Australia, his parents sent him there a couple of months before his tenth birthday to go to school.<sup>13</sup> At Avondale, he lived with E. H. Gates, the superintendent of the Polynesian Mission<sup>14</sup> whom the Palmers had met on the *Pitcairn*.<sup>15</sup> At the end of 1904, Palmer returned home in company with Miss Ella Boyd, an Avondale graduate who was travelling to Tonga to teach a church school there.<sup>16</sup>

When the *Pukekura Training School* was opened in 1908<sup>17</sup> as the first Adventist post-elementary school in New Zealand,<sup>18</sup> Palmer was one of the first students to enroll.<sup>19</sup> Here he was baptized in 1909.<sup>20</sup> When the school was transferred to a new location further south in 1913 and took the name *Oroua Missionary School*,<sup>21</sup> he was its first student.<sup>22</sup> He continued his studies there for the next two years<sup>23</sup> before he enrolled in the "College Course" at the Australasian Missionary College (AMC) at Avondale in 1915.<sup>24</sup> This two-year course prepared him to be a teacher and, upon graduating at the end of 1916, he was asked to teach at AMC for the next two years.<sup>25</sup>

## Marriage and Family

On January 1, 1919, Palmer married Dora Lillian Burns with whom he had become acquainted while she was a student in his English class at Australasian Missionary College.<sup>26</sup>

Dora Burns was the eldest surviving child of Henry Martin Burns (1866-1922)<sup>27</sup> and his wife Clementina Augustina née Powell (1870-1959)<sup>28</sup> who lived in Cooranbong<sup>29</sup> near AMC. She had been born in Melbourne, Victoria, on October 5, 1898,<sup>30</sup> so was just twenty years old. The other children of the family were Cecilia Sylvia (1894-1895),<sup>31</sup> Eliza (1895-1895),<sup>32</sup> Nelson Clement Henry (1896-1979),<sup>33</sup> Eric Roy (1903-1981),<sup>34</sup> and Chester Arnold (1906-1990).<sup>35</sup>

Dora and Cyril Palmer had three children. Nelson William was born January 2, 1920, in Wahroonga, New South Wales. He became a teacher, pastor, and missionary like his father.<sup>36</sup> Calvin Henry was born July 7, 1922, in Suva, Fiji, and died February 14, 2006. He became a medical doctor and missionary.<sup>37</sup> Laurel Dulcie Erika was also born in Suva, on November 9, 1924.<sup>38</sup> She trained in business studies and teaching,<sup>39</sup> and married a physician, Francis Douglas Thoresen.<sup>40</sup> Together they spent many years serving in the mission field.<sup>41</sup>

## Mission Service—Fiji

After teaching for two years prior to his marriage, Palmer was appointed to join an evangelistic team in Newcastle in 1919.<sup>42</sup> At the end of that year, he returned to teaching, taking charge of the Adventist Indian School in Suva, Fiji.<sup>43</sup> The young Palmer family sailed early in the new year<sup>44</sup> and spent two years at that school.<sup>45</sup> From 1922 to 1924, Palmer was in charge of the Buresala Training School on the island of Ovalau.<sup>46</sup>

## Tonga

At the Australasian Union Conference (AUC) session held in Sydney in August 1924, Palmer was appointed to take charge of the training school on Tongatapu, Tonga.<sup>47</sup> He and his family, which now included three children, left Fiji for Tonga on December 12, 1924.<sup>48</sup> On arrival in Nuku'alofa, Palmer was pleased to find that despite not having visited the country for twelve years, he could still remember enough of the language to take a service the very next day.<sup>49</sup> The school was a new one situated in Houma, about ten kilometers from Nuku'alofa, on the other side of the island.<sup>50</sup> Palmer took up his work enthusiastically and was full of plans to combine evangelistic work with the training school program.<sup>51</sup>

## New Zealand

Unfortunately, during 1926 illness intervened and the family was sent back for recuperation in the Sydney Sanitarium.<sup>52</sup> Memories of the death of Pearl Tolhurst in Ha'api, Tonga, just seven years previously may have prompted the AUC's decisive response.<sup>53</sup> While regaining his health, Palmer was a delegate to the union conference session held during August/September 1926.<sup>54</sup> At these meetings, he was appointed secretary of the Education and Missionary Volunteer departments in the cooler climate of the North New Zealand Conference.<sup>55</sup>

Refreshed and revitalized, the Palmers sailed for Auckland on October 23, 1926.<sup>56</sup> At the December conference session, Cyril Palmer was invested with a ministerial license.<sup>57</sup> During the next year he enjoyed the opportunity to be involved with the program at the New Zealand Missionary School (NZMC, formerly Oroua Missionary School) where he had been a student thirteen years previously.<sup>58</sup> He was also involved with promoting the recently instituted Home Commission and supporting the Appeal for Missions campaign.<sup>59</sup> During the conference session held over the year end of 1928, the position of Home Missions (a close equivalent of today's Personal Ministries) secretary was added to Palmers's responsibilities.<sup>60</sup> This proved to be a heavy workload.

Consequently, at the conference session twelve months later, the education department was assigned to E. Rosendahl.<sup>61</sup> Palmer was able to continue his association with NZMC, which he enjoyed, by supporting and encouraging their participation in the annual Appeal for Missions campaign.<sup>62</sup>

Palmer was a delegate to the AUC session in Melbourne in September 1930.<sup>63</sup> Hoping that his health had improved enough for him to once again serve in the tropics, he was appointed to return to Buresala in Fiji.<sup>64</sup> However, he was disappointed when subsequent medical tests contraindicated his improved health and the move was rescinded.<sup>65</sup>

## Fiji Again

Just a few weeks later, on November 23, a disastrous storm in Fiji sank the Buresala School mission launch with the loss of the principal, Fred Lang, and seven who were with him. The school also sustained severe damage.<sup>66</sup> Palmer was doubly needed there now. It took a few months, but he finally received clearance and those at the school were encouraged to know that their former principal was coming back to lead in the recovery.<sup>67</sup>

The Palmer family sailed from New Zealand for Fiji on May 27, 1931.<sup>68</sup> Cyril Palmer lost no time in re-acquainting himself with the Fiji Mission<sup>69</sup> and embarking on the refurbishment of the school.<sup>70</sup> All at Buresala were thrilled when Palmer took delivery of a new mission launch obtained through union-wide fund-raising, to replace the one that sank with such loss.<sup>71</sup> The set-back the school experienced from the storm proved only temporary and the 1932 school year commenced with a capacity enrollment. Prolific gardens fed the school family.<sup>72</sup>

## Ordination

On July 9, 1932, Palmer was ordained to the gospel ministry during the 1932 Fiji *Bose* (camp meeting) held on Nukulau Island. W. G. Turner, AUC president, officiated in the service which included the ordination of Ratu Mosesi and Ratu Jope.<sup>73</sup>

## Western Australia

Shortly after W. G. Turner returned to Australia, the annual AUC session convened and voted to appoint Palmer principal of the West Australian Missionary College (WAMC) at Carmel, Western Australia.<sup>74</sup> So, after barely eighteen months at Buresala, the Palmers were on the move again, leaving Fiji on November 24, 1932.<sup>75</sup> On their way, they visited Palmer's family who had moved to Auckland,<sup>76</sup> and spent a few weeks in Wahroonga, Sydney,<sup>77</sup> where both the church headquarters and the Sydney Sanitarium were located. After leaving Sydney they stopped off in Adelaide to visit Burns family members<sup>78</sup> before arriving in Perth in time to settle in at the college by the opening of the 1933 school year.<sup>79</sup>

Palmer was rapidly initiated into the extra-curricular activities of the students with the Appeal for Missions campaign collection.<sup>80</sup> Dora Palmer became involved in the music program at the college contributing her skill as a violinist.<sup>81</sup> For the first time, the college put forward candidates for the Educational Advisory Board examinations (standardized tests available to all Adventist schools), and satisfactory results were obtained.<sup>82</sup> The college year ended on a high note spiritually when Palmer baptized seventeen people on the last Sabbath.<sup>83</sup> He again conducted a baptismal class in 1934, culminating in a baptism of ten on the closing weekend.<sup>84</sup>

At the Western Australia Conference session held in March 1935, Palmer was given the added responsibility of education secretary for the conference.<sup>85</sup> On April 2 that year, the WAMC experienced a miraculous escape<sup>86</sup> from damage by a cyclonic hail storm that completely destroyed farms and orchards just on the other side of the road from the school.<sup>87</sup> Palmer described seeing the storm divide and pass around the perimeter of the college, an event which he believed demonstrated God's care and protection for the school.<sup>88</sup>

In August 1935, Palmer travelled across the continent to attend meetings with other Adventist educators, which were followed by the annual council.<sup>89</sup> At these meetings the surprise announcement was made that beginning in January 1936, Palmer would be the principal and manager of the Australasian Missionary College at Avondale, the premier Adventist educational institution in the Australasian Union Conference.<sup>90</sup> During Palmer's three years at WAMC, a number of improvements had been undertaken including a new library, offices and extra classrooms, a new laundry, a swimming pool, and other improvements to the student accommodation.<sup>91</sup>

## Avondale

The Palmers relocated as soon as school ended in Western Australia. Palmer was at Avondale to take up his new responsibilities by the first week of January 1936.<sup>92</sup> The college opened for the new school year on March 4 with the largest enrollment of its forty-year history, exceeding three hundred for the first time. Ninety prospective students could not be accepted even though extra accommodation had been prepared during the holiday break as it was still not enough.<sup>93</sup> At the end of the year, thirty-nine students graduated compared with twenty-three the previous year.<sup>94</sup>

The next year, 1937, saw a further increase in enrollment at Avondale<sup>95</sup> and a graduating class of thirty-five.<sup>96</sup> During 1937, it was determined that the rapid expansion of the network of Adventist schools in the Pacific Islands needed the supervision of someone experienced in the island educational needs and practices.<sup>97</sup> Palmer was seen as ideal for this task, and was appointed AUC education secretary with specific responsibility for the Pacific Island fields.<sup>98</sup>

## Pacific Islands

Although he was based in New South Wales, Palmer spent most of 1938 travelling throughout the western Pacific Island mission fields. During the first six months, he spent time in the Cook Islands,<sup>99</sup> Tonga,<sup>100</sup> Fiji,<sup>101</sup> and Samoa,<sup>102</sup> itinerating extensively throughout those islands and visiting as many schools as he could.<sup>103</sup> In Tonga, the boarding school that was to become Beulah College was under construction and he was encouraged to see that it already had one hundred pupils. He was also impressed with the Tongan teachers.<sup>104</sup>

Palmer arrived home from this trip in July<sup>105</sup> and by September was travelling again, spending two weeks as a delegate to the Queensland camp meeting.<sup>106</sup> In October, Palmer sailed for the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) calling at Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands on the way.<sup>107</sup> He was only home for a few days when he sailed again, this time for New Zealand to speak at the year-end camp meetings.<sup>108</sup> All these visits were greatly appreciated.<sup>109</sup>

## New Zealand Again

Meanwhile, other events transpired which brought about the need to quickly find a principal for the NZMC. Palmer agreed to go and, within a few days of his return from New Zealand, the Palmer family left Sydney on January 19, 1939.<sup>110</sup> By the opening of the college year on March 8, 1939,<sup>111</sup> the family was well settled. All three children attended the college<sup>112</sup> allowing the whole family to stay together.

During Palmer's six years as principal and manager, NZMC saw much growth including academic success and spiritual development.<sup>113</sup> By the end of the six years, the Palmers' eldest son, Nelson, was married and the headmaster of the Cook Islands Training School.<sup>114</sup> Their second son, Calvin, had been conscripted into the army.<sup>115</sup> Daughter Laurel was worked in the office at NZMC.<sup>116</sup>

## Fiji Once More

During 1944, L. V. Wilkinson, the superintendent of the Fiji Mission received medical advice that he needed to leave the tropics and return to a cooler climate.<sup>117</sup> Palmer agreed to exchange places with him, becoming superintendent of the Fiji Mission while Wilkinson accepted the leadership of NZMC. The swap took effect in January 1945.<sup>118</sup>

Laurel Palmer accompanied her parents when they sailed for Fiji as she was appointed to teach music and work in the Fulton Missionary School office.<sup>119</sup> This she did for one year.<sup>120</sup> Cyril Palmer found that travel around Fiji was much easier than when he had served there previously. He was able to visit the various mission posts more frequently.<sup>121</sup> He was encouraged to find his former students now holding positions of leadership and that the church had grown substantially, reaching 2,500 adherents.<sup>122</sup>

## Back to Western Australia

Towards the end of 1947, the Palmers requested a transfer back to a temperate climate as Dora Palmer's health was deteriorating.<sup>123</sup> This coincided with a reorganization of the administration of the Adventist work in Fiji that combined the mission to the Indian inhabitants with the mission to the Fijians, meaning that no replacement for Palmer was needed.<sup>124</sup> He worked hard until he left, and was excited by the continued growth. At the end of the year, he reported that twenty-eight candidates were baptized at the Fulton Missionary School closing exercises.<sup>125</sup> At special union conference meetings held January 15 to 20, he was appointed to again be the principal of WAMC at Carmel.<sup>126</sup>

The Palmers arrived in Sydney on February 17, 1948, following Laurel's wedding in Auckland, New Zealand, on January 7.<sup>127</sup> Cyril Palmer continued on to Western Australia the next day as classes had already commenced for the new academic year.<sup>128</sup> The college had grown since he was there previously and there were now nine on the staff besides himself and Dora, who taught music.<sup>129</sup> He still found it an enjoyable place to work, but after three years at Carmel he requested a change from the stresses of administration.<sup>130</sup>

## Pastoral Work

Being notified of Palmer's request, the Greater Sydney Conference invited him to pastor the Wahroonga church in January 1951.<sup>131</sup> As the Adventist headquarters office was just across the road, this was familiar territory to him and he had the opportunity to associate with many friends of past years. The church had a membership of over 500,<sup>132</sup> which included a number of retired church workers as well as young people who worked in the church office and the Sydney Sanitarium next door. This proximity meant that he was frequently called upon to conduct funerals at which he never tired of sharing the blessed hope of the resurrection.<sup>133</sup>

After four years, Palmer was asked to accept the added responsibility of district leader, which he carried for three years.<sup>134</sup> This connected him with a number of lay missions that he was able to support by running a series of evangelism training classes.<sup>135</sup>

## Retirement

In February 1958, Palmer reached sixty-five years of age. He retired in March. In 1958, the General Conference session was scheduled to meet in Cleveland, Ohio,<sup>136</sup> from June 19 to 28.<sup>137</sup> Cyril and Dora Palmer made plans to attend the General Conference Session.<sup>138</sup> They were farewelled with fond appreciation and acknowledged in particular for the more than fifty young people that Palmer had studied with and baptized during his seven years at the Wahroonga church.<sup>139</sup>

Cyril and Dora Palmer made the most of their trip, exploring as many different countries as they could as well as visiting their daughter's family in the United States after the General Conference.<sup>140</sup> After being away about eight months, they returned to Sydney.<sup>141</sup>

In 1959, Palmer's book, *Tales of Tonga*, was published.<sup>142</sup> The same year he was appointed chaplain of the newly-constituted Sydney University Seventh-day Adventist Students' Society.<sup>143</sup> In January 1962, he commenced working at the Sydney Sanitarium as assistant chaplain<sup>144</sup> and continued in this role for ten fulfilling years.<sup>145</sup> Cyril and Dora Palmer spent their last years in the retirement community at Camelia Court in Hornsby.<sup>146</sup>

## Death

On the evening of October 13, 1976, Palmer died in the Sydney Adventist Hospital after a very brief illness.<sup>147</sup> He had continued in active service until this time.<sup>148</sup> He was buried in the Avondale Cemetery at Cooranbong.<sup>149</sup> Many tributes were given: He was a man "whose greeting (was) a benediction, who radiate(d) hopefulness...always cheerful and positive, never critical or bitter".<sup>150</sup>

Three years and ten months later, on August 12, 1980, Dora Palmer also died in the Sydney Adventist Hospital.<sup>151</sup> She had uncomplainingly up-rooted and moved about fifteen times during their married life. She had supported her husband, raising their children in isolated locations, and teaching full-time for twenty-five years without pay just to help out in the schools where Cyril Palmer served.<sup>152</sup> She also worked in the school offices when that was needed, and beautified the atmosphere with her music. At her funeral, this tribute was paid.

All who came within the circle of her influence were blessed by this lovely and gracious woman. She made friends of every person she met and her friends became her family. Dora's sympathetic understanding always drew her to search out the discouraged, the weak and the lonely...she imparted confidence and the realisation that they had something of value to give to the world.<sup>153</sup>

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