

Thorpe, Ethelbert Ellis (1877–1962), and Lydia Mercy (Williams) (1878–1972)



Ethelbert and Lydia Thorpe and their daughter Elva

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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.

Ethelbert and Lily Thorpe served as pioneer missionaries in Tonga and Java. For short periods between their mission postings they served in pastoral positions in Australia.

Early Years

Ethelbert Ellis Thorpe was born to John and Frances Eustacia (Bottrill) Thorpe on May 18, 1877, in the rural village of Kangarilla, southeast of Adelaide.¹ He was one of a family of 16.² As a young man he became the storekeeper and postmaster for the community.³ In 1896 a small company of Seventh-day Adventists formed in the town, he being one of their group as a new member of the church.⁴

In his early 20s Thorpe took a decisive step to train as a nurse with the prospect of overseas mission service. He enrolled for training in the first class to be formed at the Avondale Health Retreat in Cooranbong, NSW, a class that transferred to the Sydney Sanitarium midterm before graduation in 1903. A young lady named Lydia

Williams, better known as Lily, was in the same class. Both had done an additional course in preparation for mission service.⁵ Lily was born in Sydney on March 4, 1878.⁶ She had worked as a cashier in a Sydney business but lost her position when she became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1897 and refused to work on Saturdays. Similar work was found for her in the Melbourne office of the Australian Tract Society⁷ until she began training as a nurse at the Summer Hill Sanitarium. From there she transferred into the same class as Ethelbert Thorpe.⁸ A month after their graduation, on October 28, 1903, they married at the Sydney Sanitarium.⁹

Overseas Service

Two days after their marriage they sailed for their appointment to the Christchurch Sanitarium.¹⁰ It proved to be a brief term of only 15 months because patronage was low.¹¹ In 1905 they returned to the Sydney Sanitarium, where Ethelbert worked as head nurse in the men's treatment rooms. On June 24 Lily gave birth to Elva Eunice.¹² Approximately four months later they responded to an invitation to do mission work in the Friendly Islands, or Tonga. They sailed from Sydney on November 8, 1905.¹³ They applied themselves to evangelism and medical work until the end of 1907 before returning to Australia.¹⁴

While waiting for another overseas mission assignment Ethelbert ministered in the Sydney churches.¹⁵ It wasn't long before they received an appointment to Java. They sailed from Sydney on October 1, 1908.¹⁶ They were fortunate to be assigned to the mission's mountain retreat, Soembar Wekas, and they made medical missionary trips by horseback into the surrounding area. Lily wrote of one day trip to a village where they treated forty patients with various maladies such as rheumatism, malaria, skin diseases, and eye infections.¹⁷ This work broke down prejudice, and they started an elementary school in their home for a handful of students.¹⁸ A tiger visited their home on one occasion, seeking to make a meal of their dog, but while Lily sprinted for the shotgun it slunk away.¹⁹ On another occasion a large snake slithered onto her balcony while she was sewing some garments. Once again she ran for the shotgun, only to find that the creature had slid under the floor matting. She emptied both barrels into the matting, dispatching the hapless snake without further ado.²⁰

Church officials commented that the Thorpes exercised a close rapport with the local people and that their work was highly valued by everyone.²¹ Surprisingly, in the relatively cool climate of their mountain retreat they suffered malarial attacks. By 1910 Lily, especially, was experiencing fevers every few days. They were crushing her energies. Having invested time in learning something of the local languages and earning such a good reputation among the people, they were reluctant to surrender their station and return to their homeland. In desperation they took packhorses, blankets, and food supplies to the highest mountain in Java, Lali Djiwa, in order to spend a few weeks in the extreme cold. They were told that a European had built a shack among the frost and fir trees and cured his malaria by living there for a short time. At night the Thorpe family slept under six blankets with four hot-water bottles. During the day the bracing winds were relentless. On their return to their clinic they resumed their work with renewed vigor, hoping to stay another two years.²² It was not to be.

After another 12 months they were obliged to return to Australia, Lily's fevers becoming acute once again. They arrived in Australia on December 1, 1911.²³

Lily recovered quickly, and within three months she and Ethelbert accepted a return to Tonga. They sailed on February 27, 1912²⁴ with the mandate to pioneer the island of Vava'u.²⁵ They settled into a temporary home, all the time searching for a suitable site for a permanent mission station. Medical treatments were administered and Bible readings given in their home for a group of approximately 18 interested people.²⁶ The enterprise developed into an elementary school with thirty students.²⁷ By 1915 their efforts yielded some baptisms and the basis of a small company of Sabbathkeepers.²⁸ In 1916 Ethelbert was elected as the director of the Friendly Islands Mission, extending his responsibilities.²⁹ Eventually, on Vava'u, a property for lease was located a short distance from the main town, Neiafu, and Ethelbert established a mission center he named Mizpeh. Alongside their home another building was erected to serve as a church and a school for fifty pupils. On March 28, 1917, two hundred people, including government dignitaries, gathered for the official opening and dedication.³⁰ Further additions were made soon after, chiefly a large cement tank in which to store rain water because there were no rivers or springs in the vicinity.³¹ After six years of work they returned to Australia for what proved to be a four-year break. Then, on December 1, 1921, they sailed again for Tonga³² to give another two years of mission service.³³

Back in Australia

During their break from overseas service, 1918–1921, Ethelbert managed the general store on the campus of the Australasian Missionary College (AMC).³⁴ In that same period the Spanish influenza epidemic visited their district, and the Thorpes risked their lives to voluntarily nurse the afflicted.³⁵

In retirement Ethelbert and Lily Thorpe engaged actively in the Avondale church, Cooranbong, NSW. He served as an elder and church organist. He enjoyed good health up until a few months before his death on December 4, 1962.³⁶ Lily lived with her daughter, Elva, long-term commercial teacher at AMC, and when needing specialist care in her final years, she was admitted to Charles Harrison Memorial Nursing Home, where she died on July 23, 1972.³⁷ They were the epitome of medical missionaries, plowing new ground in Java and the Pacific Islands.

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