John Benjamin and Elizabeth Celia Conley

Photo courtesy of Marian de Berg.

Conley, John Benjamin (1899–1987) and Elizabeth Celia (Ross) (1897–1990)

MARIAN DE BERG

Marian de Berg, secretarial (Avondale University College, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia) retired in 2017 as administration assistant, Ellen G. White/SDA Research Centre, Avondale University College. A New Zealander by birth she has served the church in South New Zealand and Queensland conferences, South Pacific Division, and Avondale University College. In retirement she enjoys guiding at Sunnyside Historic House. She authored the book *Stories from Sunnyside* and wrote several articles for *Record*. She is married to Kevin with 2 adult daughters and 3 grandsons.

John Benjamin and Elizabeth Celia Conley were Australian missionaries in India. John Conley also served as teacher and evangelist in Australia and New Zealand.

Early Years

John Benjamin Conley was born to Robert (1853-1942) and Mary (1862-1930) Conley on April 3, 1899 in Martinsville, Australia in stormy weather that Ellen White described as "cyclonic."[1] The Irish Presbyterian family purchased land near Cooranbong to survive the depression that had hit Australia in the 1890s. Ellen White, together with her nurse, Sara McEnterfer, visited this home several days after John's birth, and asked if she could pray over the baby and dedicate him to the Lord.[2] John had five siblings, Jane (1884-1965), David (1886-1961), Mary (1891-1966), Margaret (1892-1971), and Robert (1897-1972). While attending the local school at Martinsville, a predominately Catholic area, and later Cooranbong public schools, young John felt bullied by the students and teachers. Unjustly punished by the teacher with the cane across his knuckles, young John picked up the inkwell and threw it at the teacher, which landed directly on the teacher's white shirt. John then jumped out of the nearest window and headed for home to relate his side of the story. His parents eventually sought permission from the "bean chewers" (a derogatory name given to Adventist vegetarians) at Avondale for him to attend school there, despite being too young and not a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.[3] Here he was baptized at Dora Creek in 1917 and graduated in 1919 from the Missionary and Bible Worker's Course.[4]

Elizabeth Cecelia[5] Ross was born on January 26, 1897 to George (1862-1936) and Elizabeth (1860-1935) Ross, and had three siblings, John (1890-1934), James (1892-1955) and Elsie (1901-1938). Her parents were pioneer farmers in the Gippsland district of Victoria. Prior to World War I, the family moved to the Melbourne suburb of Collingwood. Here Celia, Elsie, and their mother attended lectures by Pastor J.W. Kent and joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1918. Celia subsequently lost employment because of the Sabbath and joined the canvassing team.[6]

Early Ministry and Marriage

Called to the colporteur ministry in Victoria, John began selling Ellen White's book *The Great Controversy*.[7] Another young member on the team, Celia Ross, sold the same book.[8] In 1922 Celia left Victoria to join the nursing class at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital at Wahroonga, New South Wales.[9] A marriage proposal from John followed later and Celia withdrew from the course to marry her sweetheart. Married female students

were not permitted to continue in the nursing course at that time. John and Celia married in the bride's home at Alphington, Victoria on the evening of February 5, 1924 with a guest list of sixty.[10] Employed in evangelistic work in Wonthaggi and Kurumburra[11] the young couple received an invitation to join Reuben Hare in evangelism in India toward the end of that year.[12]

Missionaries in India

On November 26, 1924 John and Celia (now seven months pregnant),[13] set sail for India to work with the English-speaking inhabitants of the country. They were stationed in Bombay for the first twelve months before moving to Cawnpore (now Kanpur).[14] During that time, Conley also conducted a small evangelistic series at Byculla.[15] A large European population resided in this city and the program was soon advertised in rented halls. Tracts and sermons by clergy of other denominations denigrated the series, but a good interest continued.[16] In 1927 four people were baptized in a lagoon by the side of the Ganges River.[17] John was ordained to the gospel ministry in June 1928 at Lucknow, in northern India.[18] From Kanpur the family moved to Allahabad.[19]

Toward the end of 1931 a short series of meetings commenced during the winter for the English-speaking people of Allahabad prior to the family's first furlough back to Australia. In the foothills of the Himalayas near Mussoorie, the Conleys took respite in the cooler climate, usually accompanied with speaking appointments and small evangelistic meetings in the surrounding areas.[20] Keen opposition from other denominations followed whenever programs were held. In preparation for the meetings, Celia would canvass the area with Christian books. In October 1935, John conducted India's first tent evangelistic series in the city of Lucknow. The tent was described as khaki on the outside, lined with a pale blue ceiling and dark blue walls. There was much speculation as to whether this type of evangelism would be successful in India.[21] John also baptized the late General Conference President, Neal Wilson, as a youth in India.

Missionaries were seldom able to say goodbye to close family members. Celia lost her brother John, mother, and father all within a short period. Her sister Elsie, who felt the loss greatly, was invited to join the Conley family in India. Arriving toward the end of 1937, Elsie worked in the Northwest Union Conference Office before moving to Vincent Hill School, a co-educational boarding school primarily for missionary children, as a stenographic teacher and office assistant. Unfortunately, at the end of August she lapsed into a coma and passed away within two days from cerebrospinal meningitis. She was laid to rest in the same cemetery at Mussoorie as her little niece Audrey who had died ten years before.[22] In 1936 John was acting superintendent of the Northwest India Union Mission and superintendent of the United Provinces Mission Field from 1936-1939.[23]

During the time the Conleys were in India several articles were written reminding missionaries of the large investment made in them by the Church and of the constant need to care for their health through a good diet, exercise, and to become knowledgeable about the impact of tropical diseases on health.[24]

Furloughs

The Conley's first furlough was taken seven years after their arrival in India, at the end of 1931. Family times were dispersed with mission talks at camp meetings and churches and John also helped at the Geelong, Glenhuntly, Caulfield, and Oakleigh churches and tent missions.[25] Their return to India saw them stationed at Allahabad.[26] Excitement rose when their second furlough commenced in March 1939.[27] Celia and the children sailed for Australia while John set off to visit Old Babylon, Mesopotamia, and the Holy Land. A diary entry in 1939 indicated that his thirty-year ambition to travel to these places was finally fulfilled.[28] Back in Australia in mid-1939 John attended churches and camp meetings, relating his Bible land tour and mission experiences. Medical reports recommended a further twelve months in Australia and John commenced evangelistic work in Victoria.[29]

Family

Wallace Ross Conley was born to John and Celia on January 28, 1925 in Bombay, India. He became a teacher and taught in Church and government schools. Wallace never married and died on July 20, 2004.[30] Audrey Maree Conley was born to John and Celia in 1927 at Cawnpore, India. Sadly, this young child died on August 3, 1928 after an acute attack of dysentery. Her grave is at the local cemetery in Mussoorie, India.[31] Sheila George Conley, their third child, was born on March 11, 1928 at Cawnpore, India. On February 8, 1953, she married Donald Joseph Dever (1931-).[32]

In Australia

Back home, John ran his first large city evangelistic series in Melbourne in 1940 with crowds of 1,300 or more.[33] In 1942 he accepted a two-year position as a Bible teacher at the Australasian Missionary College (now Avondale College). During this time, he also served on the executive committee of the North New South Wales Conference, represented the College at the conference camp, and officiated at baptisms at the College. While living at Cooranbong he was able to bid farewell to his father, who was interned at the local Avondale Seventh-day Adventist Cemetery.[34]

Under the banner of the South New South Wales Conference, John conducted a Sydney Town Hall evangelistic series during 1944-45. An appointment as the ministerial association secretary for the Australasian Union Conference followed and he spent the next six months traveling overseas where he studied Protestant history in London, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland before heading to Paris. He also attended ministerial institutes and spent time at the theological seminary in Washington, D.C.[35] Over the next six years, John was involved in many evangelistic programs around Australia and was a delegate to many conference camp meetings.

In 1952 the family moved to Christchurch, New Zealand where John conducted a large city evangelistic series in the Tivoli and Regent Theatres for two years.[36] Returning to Victoria for the next twelve years, John ran programs

in Caulfield, Malvern, Box Hill, Ringwood, Geelong, Colac, Bendigo, Kyneton, Castlemaine, Maryborough, Croydon, and Beronia.[37] He was also involved in "It Is Written" programs in country areas[38] and advocated the need for a pictorial aid for laymen, later produced by Pastor Frank Breaden in 1970.[39] John Conley passed away on June 3, 1987 at Coronella Retirement Homes, Nunawading, Victoria and was buried in the Avondale Adventist Cemetery at Cooranbong where his parents, brothers, and sisters are interned.[40] In 1996 a commemorative stone from the family property at Martinsville, together with a plaque describing Ellen White's visit at the time of his birth, was placed on his grave.[41] Celia Conley passed away on April 3, 1990 and was buried at Lethbridge Cemetery in Victoria[42] where her son Wallace and grandmother also await the call of Jesus.

Contributions

John wrote several articles during his lifetime for Adventist Church papers, including the *Australasian Record*, *Eastern Tidings*, and the *Review and Herald*. Affectionately known as "J.B.," he is well remembered as one of the church's leading evangelists in the South Pacific Division. He prepared material for the Australian government, which was presented at the United Nations to help defeat the World Calendar idea.[43] He was instrumental in the short-lived conversion of entertainer, "Little Richard" while on an Australian tour, who then enrolled at Oakwood College in America to train for the ministry.[44] In 1979 and 1980 John wrote three articles for the *Australasian Record* on the early work of the Church in Cooranbong, the choice of the Avondale School, the establishment of *Sunnyside*, and the early families of the district.[45]

Conley's family members have donated sermon and evangelistic notes, advertising leaflets and handouts, newspaper cuttings, letters, preaching plans, Bibles, and diaries to the Adventist Heritage Centre Archives at Avondale College of Higher Education.[46] Conley performed many marriages and numerous obituaries appear in our church papers stating he had previously baptized the individual concerned. He humbly stated: "I have baptized over two thousand souls; and I want my wife to share the honor with me." ("Circle of Influence," *Australasian Record*, January 1, 1976.)[47] Celia estimated that she had set up home for her family in 38 places in Australia, India, and New Zealand.[48]

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3. Wallace Conley wrote this Life Sketch which was read at the funeral of J.B. Conley. Held in Document File 28-c-1 at the Ellen G White/SDA Research Centre, Avondale College of Higher Education.

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30. Mead, Ken, "Wallace Ross Conley obituary," *Record*, September 18, 2004, 14.

31. J.B. Conley, "Audrey Conley obituary," *Australasian Record*, October 15, 1928, 7.

32. J.B. Conley, "Wedding Bells – Dever-Conley," *Australasian Record*, April 6, 1953, 14.

33. "Word from the President…," *Australasian Record*, May 13, 1940, 8.

34. R. Hare, "Robert Conley obituary," *Australasian Record*, May 4, 1942, 7.

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36. J.B. Conley, "Christchurch City Mission," *Australasian Record*, February 8, 1954, 7.

37. Life Sketch presented at the funeral of J.B. Conley. Held in Document File 28-c-1 at the Ellen G White/SDA Research Centre, Avondale College of Higher Education.

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43. Life Sketch presented at the funeral of J.B. Conley. Held in Document File 28-c-1 at the Ellen G White/SDA Research Centre, Avondale College of Higher education

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45. J.B. Conley wrote three articles on the history of Cooranbong at the time of Ellen White. They appear in the *Australasian Record*, "Cooranbong – The Place of God's Choice," October 22, 1979, 8, 13; "Overcoming Early Problems," November 5, 1979, 14-15; "Church Life in Cooranbong Before the Adventists Came," April 28, 1980, 3.

46. The family of J.B. Conley have donated much material to the Adventist Heritage Centre. See the J.B. Conley Collection, Adventist Heritage Centre, South Pacific Division.

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48. Life Sketch for Celia Conley.

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