



Grave of Wilfred Jonathan Airey.

Photo courtesy of Flo McOwen-Snyder. Source: *Find a Grave*, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/203966639/wilfred-j-airey>

Airey, Wilfred Jonathan (1911–2005)

KATHERINE KOH

After completing her studies at La Sierra University, the University of Cambridge, and the University of California, Riverside, Dr. Katherine Koh became a faculty member at La Sierra University in 2010, where she teaches courses in the history of the Christian Church, as well as European history in general.

Wilfred Jonathan Airey was a renowned Adventist educator and an active participant in public institutions for higher education. Airey was instrumental in the establishment of the Moreno Valley Community College and Norco College.

Early Life

Wilfred Jonathan Airey was born on January 8, 1911, in Gaston, Oregon, to Robert Airey (1862-1953), a schoolteacher and the first Principal of Laurelwood Adventist Academy, and his wife Hester, née Bunch (1869-1956). He was the youngest of five children: Florence, Elizabeth, Henriette, Robert, and Wilfred. All five of the Airey children were born in Oregon, but after Wilfred Airey's birth the family moved to Idaho. The family eventually returned to Oregon in time for Airey to attend Laurelwood Adventist Academy for his secondary education. While at Laurelwood, he served in student government (including a term as Student Association President) and his abilities as a scholar regularly earned him a place on the school's honor roll, foreshadowing his future in academia.

Education and Marriage

Airey graduated from Laurelwood Adventist Academy in 1929, prior to spending his college years at a variety of Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education, including Walla Walla College (now Walla Walla University) in 1929-1930 and 1932-1933, Southern California Junior College in Arlington, California (now La Sierra University) in 1930-1931, and Pacific Union College in 1931-1932, before finally graduating from Walla Walla College in 1933. He went on to complete both a Master's degree in 1938 and a PhD in 1945 in history from the University of Washington. He wrote his Master's thesis on early Christian perspectives of pagan literature and learning,¹ but studied modern American history for his Ph.D. work, writing a doctoral dissertation entitled "A History of the Constitution and Government of Washington Territory."² In the midst of his graduate education, Airey also worked as principal of the Milton, Oregon, Intermediate School, a Teaching Fellow at University of Washington from 1937 to 1939, and an instructor of history at Walla Walla from 1939 to 1941.

On September 14, 1939, Airey married Dortha Bly Gorsuch (June 21, 1912-February 10, 1981) in Multnomah, Oregon.³ The marriage produced two children, Joanne Elizabeth Airey (1943-Present) and Wilfred Jonathan Airey, Jr. (1944-Present). Dortha also became an educator, working in the Alvord Unified School District of Riverside, California, for more than twenty-five years.

Career and Ministry

Airey began teaching at La Sierra College (later La Sierra University) in 1941 where he spent the next forty-five years, acting as head of the History Department for much of that time. He taught a number of courses focusing on the history of Western Civilization, including classes on ancient Rome, colonial America, Californian history, and the French Revolution. Outside of class, he organized and supervised several international summer tours, was a licensed minister of the Pacific Union Conference, taught an extension course for Pacific Union College in Hawaii, and attended and contributed to numerous professional and denominational meetings.

Airey was also an active participant in the public institutions for higher education in Riverside County. In 1964, he became a founding member of the first elected Riverside Community College Board of Trustees, a body he served on for thirty years. He was instrumental in the establishment of both the Moreno Valley Community College and Norco College, where the library was dedicated to and named after him on November 17, 1995.

Later Life

Following the death of his first wife, Airey married Esther Van Voorst (1921-2015) on November 24, 1981. He died on September 8, 2005, in Sonoma, California, at the age of 94.

Legacy

Wilfred Airey left behind a legacy of service to Adventist Education that spanned over half a century. In various articles and remembrances, students remember him as both a learned lecturer and spiritual mentor. A testament to these qualities is found in the dedication to him in the 1951 Yearbook for La Sierra University, "As a teacher—he has achieved the high service of teaching, not only a theoretical knowledge of the courses but also a philosophy of balanced Christian living."⁴

Students at La Sierra University are still encouraged by Dr. Airey's memory through the establishment in 1982 of the Landeen, Airey, Hilde Scholarship. Dr. R. Lynne Hilde, one of Wilfred Airey's former students in order to honor Dr. Airey and his colleague, William Landeen, established it. The scholarship is still awarded annually by the Department of History, Politics, and Sociology.

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NOTES

1. Wilfred J. Airey, "The Attitude of Christian Authors Towards Pagan Literature and Learning from 50 to 430 A.D." (MA thesis, University of Washington, 1939).
2. Wilfred J. Airey, "A History of the Constitution and Government of Washington Territory" (PhD Thesis, University of Washington, 1945).
3. "Dortha G. Airey Endowed Scholarship," School of Education, La Sierra University, 2017, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://lasierra.edu/schools/ed/scholarships/>.
4. The Meteor (Arlington, CA: La Sierra College, 1951), 16-17.

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