

# Maxwell, Donald Malcolm (1934–2007)

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## ERIC ANDERSON

Eric Anderson is director of the Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History at Pacific Union College (PUC) in Angwin, California. He taught at PUC for 30 years and stepped in as the college's president in 2017 during a time of transition. Previously, Anderson was president of Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas (2005-2014). Anderson earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of Chicago and has written on Reconstruction in North Carolina, philanthropic support of black education, Progressive Era vice reform, and Adventist history.

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D. Malcolm Maxwell was an influential educator, serving for 18 years as president of Pacific Union College. Born into a prominent Adventist family, he was the son of Arthur S. Maxwell, prolific writer (including the popular “Uncle Arthur” children’s series) and long-time editor of the evangelistic journal *Signs of the Times*. His older brothers were theologian Graham Maxwell, editor Lawrence Maxwell, and church historian Mervyn Maxwell.

## Early Career and Education

Prior to serving as president of Pacific Union College, Maxwell was for five years (1978-1983) the academic dean at Walla Walla College. Both before and after his administrative service, he was an accomplished teacher, first at Union College (1964-1965) and Walla Walla College (1965-1978), and at Pacific Union College (2001-2006). From 1956 to 1964 he was a pastor employed by the Northern California Conference.<sup>1</sup>

Maxwell was born in England, the son of Arthur and Rachel Joyce Maxwell. The family moved to the United States in 1936, and all of Malcolm’s education was in the United States, including Pacific Union College (1956), Andrews University, and Drew University (1968), where he earned a doctorate in Biblical studies with a New Testament emphasis (writing a dissertation on “The Significance of the Parousia in the Theology of Paul”). Despite his thorough assimilation into American culture, some people thought they detected a faint British accent in Maxwell’s speech.

## President of Pacific Union College

When Maxwell became president of Pacific Union College in 1983, the school was experiencing a crisis of confidence. Enrollment had fallen about 40 percent from its 1975 high point of 2,290.

Although PUC’s problems would later be explained as solely the result of the theological controversy associated with visiting professor Desmond Ford, in fact, the issues had many causes. Rising costs associated with national “stagflation” and a declining pool of college-age Adventist youth also played a major role in PUC’s woes.<sup>2</sup>

The year before Maxwell became president, his predecessor had ordered the destruction of Irwin Hall, long a symbol of the College, leaving only an unimpressive classroom block—after the administrative offices, the theology department, and historic chapel had been removed. This demoralizing decision was opposed by many faculty members and almost all alumni.

The first alumna to serve as Pacific Union College President, Maxwell moved quickly to rebuild confidence. A masterful communicator, who seemed to know all his employees by name, Maxwell had a knack for inspiring action. A frequent speaker in northern California churches, he repeated the message, in season and out, that PUC was faithful to the Adventist tradition. At the same time, he had no desire to purge his faculty or enforce religious purity, narrowly defined.

By one means and another, Maxwell quickly recast the religion department, so that by the beginning of the 1986 school year most of the teachers were new, with no role in earlier controversies. He secured the dismissal of only one teacher, and he was not a “liberal.” In other departments, as well, significant personnel changes occurred, as several influential or “controversial” teachers chose for a variety of reasons to pursue new ambitions.

Maxwell inherited an embarrassing symbol: the rusting steel skeleton of a stalled building project, phase two of the Science Complex. Placing characteristic emphasis on fundraising and promotion, he moved quickly to push this project through to completion. According to campus oral legend, he told his chief financial officer: “You build the new building and let me worry about the finances.” A large gift from Hong Kong philanthropist Chan Shun and an even larger gift from the Archie Tong Education Fund made it possible to open the chemistry section of the building in 1985.

Prompted by the biology department, Maxwell showed great creativity in renovating Clark Hall. Instead of leveling this striking, but increasingly shabby building, he supported the idea of refurbishing and expanding the landmark, much to the delight of alumni. A million-dollar gift from a physician who had once been a student janitor in the building was essential to this project.

Taking an active hand in personnel matters, Maxwell drew to campus talented colleagues from Walla Walla, including Charles Bell, academic dean, and Gerald Winslow, chairman of the religion department. As several long-serving administrative associates retired, he selected new leaders who served through the succeeding administration, including the chief financial officer, a new academic dean in 1999, and the vice president for student affairs. In some ways, the Maxwell era at PUC lasted much longer than 18 years.

In the later years of the Maxwell administration, Pacific Union College’s land became a matter of controversy. Maxwell began a discussion of how to extract revenue from the College’s approximately 2,000 acres of farm and forest land, suggesting creative projects such as a golf course, a cemetery, and other schemes—many involving sale rather than leasing of land. These ideas provoked wide discussion among faculty and graduates. After Maxwell’s retirement, an even more controversial proposal for a large-scale development was unsuccessfully

promoted by his successor.

The longest-serving Pacific Union College president, he is remembered with affection on the PUC campus. In the years since, each new president has been measured by Maxwell's performance, enhanced, no doubt, with the passage of time. Whenever the school faces a crisis, retired teachers or former students-turned-leaders are likely to say, "We need a president like Malcolm." People still talk about his unpretentious, gentlemanly style and unfailing courtesy.<sup>3</sup>

Maxwell married a fellow PUC student, Eileen Bolander. They were married almost 52 years, dying within a few months of each other in 2007. They were survived by two children, Donald K. Maxwell and Wendy E. Maxwell, and five grandchildren.<sup>4</sup>

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## SOURCES

Maxwell's personal and professional papers were largely destroyed after his death, though the Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History at Pacific Union College has a small collection of relevant documents.

Anderson, Eric. "PUC Since 1982." In Walter C. Utt, *A Mountain, a Pickaxe, a College*, Pacific Union College, 1996.

"Retired President Malcolm Maxwell Dies." *ARH*, October 17, 2007.

Herbert Ford and Deidre Maxwell Smith, "Life Sketch." In the author's personal collection.

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## NOTES

1. See Herbert Ford and Deidre Maxwell Smith, "Life Sketch" (2007) in the author's personal collection. "Retired President Malcolm Maxwell Dies," *ARH*, October 17, 2007.
2. This and the following five paragraphs are based on Eric Anderson, "PUC after 1982," in *Walter C. Utt, A Mountain, A Pickaxe, A College* (Pacific Union College, 1996).
3. Based on the author's personal knowledge as a Pacific Union College teacher and administrator, as well as communications from Thomas Hopmann, Charles Bell, Terrence Trivett, and Dale Withers.
4. Ford and Smith, "Life Sketch," in the author's personal collection.

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