

DeGraw, M. Bessie (Sutherland) (1871–1965)

ALBERT DITTES

Albert Dittes grew up in Portland, Tennessee, and graduated from Highland Academy. He attended Southern Adventist University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Dittes also earned a second Master's degree in journalism at Ohio University. He served in the pastoral ministry for twelve years. Dittes currently resides in his hometown where he is active in freelance writing and music, playing piano and organ for churches and teaching private lessons. He and his ex-wife have two grown children and five grandchildren.

M. Bessie DeGraw (Sutherland) devoted her distinguished teaching career to furthering Adventist educational reform. She became part of the progressive program of Edward A. Sutherland early in her career and worked closely with him for the next 60 years, becoming his wife during his last year of life. As a young educator, she became inspired both by Ellen White's calls for educational reform and the educational philosophy and programs of Booker T. Washington and Hollis Burke Frissell.¹

Educational Philosophy

Her career began after the Seventh-day Adventist Church had operated a college in Battle Creek, Michigan, for more than two decades, but had just begun to establish schools on the elementary and high school levels. Her obituary stated that she had once been the educational secretary of the Lake Union Conference, and it was perhaps in this capacity that she wrote a significant article in the September 24, 1901, issue of the *Review and Herald* proposing a pre-college Christian education system. In it she observed, "When it is once established that the denomination should maintain schools for its children and youth, the next question is, What is the work to



Bessie DeGraw Sutherland, co-founder of Madison College, taken close to her 90th birthday in 1961.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

be done in the primary and intermediate schools?" Her article went on to answer her question and apparently became foundational for the young Adventist elementary and secondary school system.

"In planning a course of study," she stated, "certain physical and spiritual laws must be followed. It is not right to launch out at random. These laws are outlined in the word of God, and the true educator is he who studies Christian education from this basis, and who conducts Christian schools upon this foundation. It is necessary, therefore, to give more than a passing glance to some Scriptural texts and some statements in the Testimonies."

"Let me say," she continued, "that 'The Desire of Ages' is the best textbook on psychology and child study that it is possible for you to find. If teachers will study this book,—not read, but study it,— they will find that it contains principles of eternal truth for the educator. The very basis of a course of study is given in the following words relating to the child Jesus: "The powers of mind and body developed gradually, in keeping with the laws of childhood." Her article then recommended a spiritual and mental training curriculum for grades 1 to 10.²

The efforts of some professional educators to help the underprivileged African-Americans also impressed her. "Dr. Frissell, the present principal of Hampton Institute, emphasizes the value to a student of working his way through school, and speaks especially of Hampton Institute's plan to teach students to be self-governing," she wrote in a 1909 *Youth's Instructor* article. "He says: 'On account of the lack of a feeling of personal responsibility on the part of the negro, there is an imperative need of the right kind of leaders among them.'³

The fundamental principles of education that Dr. Frissell enunciated to lift the Negro from slavery became part of the philosophy of Madison College, the self-supporting school she helped to pioneer. She quoted him as saying, "In order to develop this capacity for leadership [students] must gain the power of self-government, and learn how to control others during their school life. The more a student can be made to feel a sense of responsibility for the good conduct of the institution, the better. Self-government and self-support ought to be prominent features in every colored [school]. Nothing should be given that the student can earn."⁴

Booker T. Washington applied these principles at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, the institution that he made world famous. "The power of initiation that belongs to Mr. Booker Washington could only have come through a training which placed heavy responsibility on the individual," she stated. "Not only did he work his own way through school, but during his school life he had much to do with the government and instruction of his fellow students. He was trained in an institution that was a sort of an industrial village, where he had a taste of the duties and responsibilities of actual life."⁵

Early Life

M. Bessie DeGraw was born January 13, 1871, at the home of her maternal grandparents in Binghamton, New York, the oldest of the four children of Dr. Fred H. DeGraw and Mary Seymour DeGraw, whose home at the time of her birth was in Laclede, Missouri. Bessie's mother died when she was only eight years old, and her father

placed her in the home of Mrs. Marian Stowell Truesdale, whose family, along with the J. N. Andrews family, were among the first Sabbath-keeping Adventists. The Truesdales lived in Trenton, Missouri, where Bessie's father had established a dental practice, but he died soon after she moved into the Truesdale home, where she received excellent training.

Bessie attended the public schools near her home and graduated from Central Missouri State Normal School, Warrensburg, in 1891. She taught the following year at the Webb City High School and attended Battle Creek College 1892-1893 "to learn more about the Bible." Here she met Percy T. Magan, then head of the Bible and history department, who became a lifetime friend.

Denominational Service

The following year, at the age of 22, she accepted a call to the newly established Walla Walla College. There she worked closely with its young president E. A. Sutherland and his faculty in enacting major educational reforms that Ellen White had urged in letters sent from Australia.

Miss DeGraw taught and assisted with administrative work for four years at Walla Walla College, four years at Battle Creek, and three years at Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University). At this time she was one of the few professionally trained Seventh-day Adventist teachers.⁶

She was one of the pioneers in introducing a vegetarian diet in Seventh-day Adventist institutions, locating the denomination's schools in rural settings, and incorporating the Bible, health principles, agriculture, and other industries into the general program. In addition, she promoted the concepts of self-government and self-support as basic for educating students

Madison College

Beginning in 1904, she continued her pioneering work in education as one of the founders of Madison College. At Madison she especially worked diligently to apply the philosophical principles that she had frequently articulated.

Although designated as a professor, her responsibilities included much more than just teaching. Serving on governing boards and committees, she played a major role in shaping the Madison culture. In addition to her other duties at Madison, she was the school's public relations voice, continually writing about it in various Seventh-day Adventist publications as well as editing for many years the *Madison Survey*.

In order to keep tuition low so that the students would be able to work their way through school, the staff in Madison' early years accepted wages of only \$13 a month (\$340 in 2021 dollars). They were promised a raise if a good farm crop made their agriculture program sufficiently profitable, but that proved impossible for quite a

long time.⁷

Other Achievements

A prolific writer, she assisted Stephen N. Haskell in writing the books *Daniel the Prophet* and *The Seer of Patmos*. She served as editor of *The Advocate*, a journal of Christian education, being responsible for its first issue published in January 1899. Also, she assisted E. A. Sutherland with the books *Studies in Christian Education, Living Fountains or Broken Cisterns*, and many other educational documents, including several early textbooks.

George Peabody College for Teachers awarded her a Masters degree in the 1930s. Then she completed the requirements for a Ph.D. at the age of 61.⁸

Miss M. Bessie DeGraw married the widowed Sutherland in 1954. He died the next year, and she passed away June 7, 1965, at the age of 94.⁹

SOURCES

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"Last of Madison Founders Dies." *Madison Survey and Alumni News*, April-June 1965.

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"Mrs. Sutherland is 90." *Southern Tidings*, March 29, 1961.

NOTES

1. M. Bessie DeGraw, "Study for the Missionary Volunteer Society: Booker T. Washington," *The Youth's Instructor*, August 17, 1909, 13, 14.

2. M. Bessie DeGraw "Scope of Work for Primary and Intermediate Schools," *ARH*, September 24, 1901, 6, 7.

3. M. Bessie DeGraw, "Study for the Missionary Volunteer Society: Booker T. Washington," *The Youth's Instructor*, August 17, 1909, 13, 14.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. "Mrs. Sutherland is 90," *Southern Tidings*, March 29, 1961, 17.
 7. Percy T. Magan and M. Bessie DeGraw, *A First Draft History: The Madison College Experiment in Christian Education* (ForwardMoving Publishing, 2018), 31, 32.
 8. "Last of Madison Founders Dies," *Madison Survey and Alumni News*, April-June 1965, 1, 2.
 9. Ibid.
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