

# Prismall, William John (1853–1929)

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## ROBERT (BOB) HOSKEN

Robert (Bob) Hosken, Ph.D. (University of Newcastle) is a retired university lecturer, researcher, administrator, and consultant in molecular biology and food technology with over 100 publications. Hosken served the Church at Avondale College and Sanitarium Health Food Company. Hosken and his wife Jeanette were born and married in Western Australia and have three sons and six grandchildren.

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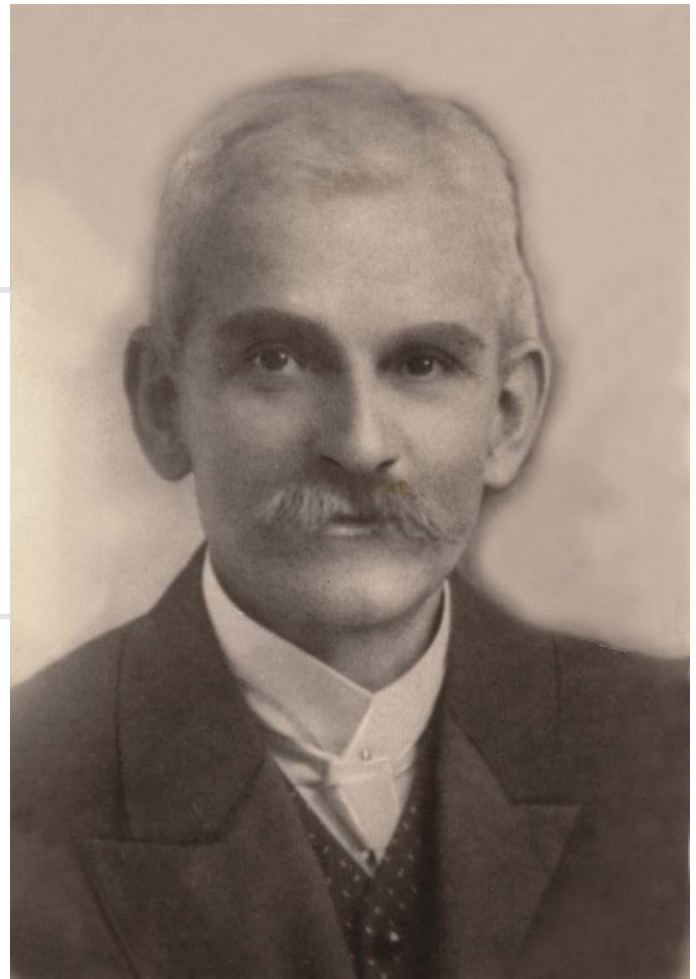
William Prismall was a founding member of the Melbourne Seventh-day Adventist Church and was influential in the breakfast cereal industry.

## Background

William John Prismall was born in Berkshire, England, in 1853, the first child of Daniel (1821–1905) and Priscilla (Smith) Prismall (1827–1869). The Prismall family had been living in the Kingsclere area since the 17th century, and the marriage of Guilielmus Prixmall to Elenora Gardyner at Kingsclere, Hampshire, on October 8, 1682, suggests a Walloon or Huguenot ancestry.<sup>1</sup>

In October 1860, Daniel and Priscilla Prismall and their four children—William, 7; Charles, 4; Emily, 2; and Elizabeth, 1—sailed from England to Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, on the *Lincolnshire*.<sup>2</sup> On arrival, Daniel established a bakery. After the birth of four more children, Priscilla, Richard, Sarah, and Joshua, Priscilla Prismall died in 1869.<sup>3</sup> Sixteen-year-old William and 13-year-old Charles (1855–1946) learned the baking trade from their father. They were employed as commodity grain millers at Parsons Brothers and helped grow the company into one of the largest food companies in Australia, which after 1953, became Uncle Toby's Oats Company.<sup>4</sup>

In 1875 William Prismall, milling engineer, married Helen "Ellen" Town (1857–1892) in the Primitive Methodist church.<sup>5</sup> Ellen Town's father, George Town (1812–1857), had died before she was born, and she had grown up in Hobart, Tasmania, with her Haywood cousins. The Haywood family owned Haywood's bakery and biscuits, which



William Prismall, 1910.

Photo courtesy of Robert Hosken.

eventually became Arnott's biscuits of Tasmania.

## Affiliating with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia

In the Golden Jubilee number of the *Australasian Record* published July 29, 1935, Charles Prismall, then 79 years old, described how William, Ellen, and Charles Prismall attended the first evangelistic campaign in Melbourne, received Bible studies, and became founding members of the Melbourne Seventh-day Adventist Church on November 14, 1885,<sup>6</sup> just five months after the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries had arrived in Australia. William was 32 years old at the time, and the father of two girls: Priscilla (Burchill, 1879–1934), who was baptized in 1891, and Lillian (Kingston, 1881–1956), who was baptized in 1895. All the family became lifetime members of the Church. William Prismall was a delegate when the first conference in Australia was organized.<sup>7</sup>

## Association with Ellen G. White

William Prismall's first recorded association with Ellen White was found in her diary of December 1892. She had arrived in Australia just over a year earlier, in November 1891. In the diary entry, she noted that she went on an outing to Ferntree Gully, Victoria. She had lunch with Brother Prismall and others, and in the afternoon Brethren Prismall and Faulkhead carried Ellen White, seated in a chair, for about two miles from the place where they were camping to see Fern Tree Gully.<sup>8</sup>

At the time, William Prismall was a relatively well-educated English colonial, obsessively particular with detail. His good command of the English language, coupled with his debating skills, propelled him into leadership positions and sometimes into conflict with others who did not live up to his expectations. On January 15, 1893, Ellen White wrote a 20-page letter to him, which included many statements such as, "This habit of criticizing and fault-finding is working harm, not only in the church, but in your own home."<sup>9</sup> It is a puzzle as to why Ellen White did not couch the letter with some reference to the spiritual struggles that William was enduring following the illness and death of his wife just four months earlier. On August 14, 1892, William's wife, Ellen, had died following surgery and a long and painful illness, leaving him to care for their two young children, Priscilla and Lillian. Her funeral service had been conducted by George C. Tenney and Arthur G. Daniells at the Melbourne Cemetery.<sup>10</sup>

Despite William Prismall's shortcomings, he became the general manager of Parsons Brothers Foods, and in February 1893 he was reelected to the board of the Bible Echo Publishing Company. W. C. White was appointed as president of the company at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

## William Prismall Visits Britain and the United States

In May 1893, William Prismall traveled to Colombo, Britain, and the United States with the aims of meeting with Parsons Brothers business partners and of investigating the latest advances in milling technology. Throughout the trip, he kept a diary of his business, church, and family meetings. The diary refers to his loneliness and spiritual struggles.

W. C. White had provided him with a letter of introduction to church leaders. Prismall referred to the letter, quoting White: "Whatever you may be able to do to make the visit of Bro Prismall pleasing and profitable will be esteemed as a personal kindness to me."<sup>12</sup> Prismall reflected: "I must say that it is very seldom that one gets such a kind letter as his to me, so rare as well that I doubt that I deserve it."<sup>13</sup>

In England, William Prismall visited Brethren Gibson, Waggoner, and Robinson and compared the church printing operation with that of the Bible Echo Publishing Company in Melbourne. In the United States, he traveled to Battle Creek, visiting Brethren Duffy, Amadon, and Uriah Smith at the Review and Herald Publishing Company. At Battle Creek Sanitarium he discussed grain processing with Dr. John Harvey Kellogg. Dr. Kellogg probably gained insights into the milling of breakfast cereals from William Prismall, as Parsons Brothers were already marketing flaked oatmeal. Kellogg patented flaked breakfast cereals in 1895, leading to Battle Creek becoming the cereal capital of the world. William also attended the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago with Maui Pomare, where he purchased a maize mill for the Sydney factory of Parsons Brothers, which employed more than 250 people.<sup>14</sup>

## Marriage of William Prismall to Elizabeth James

After returning to Australia, William Prismall married Elizabeth "Lizzy" Fisher James (1869–1958) on February 1, 1894. Lizzy was the fourth child and eldest daughter of Joseph James and Elizabeth "Bessy" Turner.<sup>15</sup>

The first child of William and Lizzy Prismall was named Ellie (Anderson-Ruxton, 1884–1971), followed by Herbert (1900–1957), Hermie (Vietz, 1902–1988), Lindsay (1904–?) and Bertha (Ahern, 1907–1992). Meanwhile, William's children, Priscilla and Lillian, enrolled at the Avondale School in New South Wales when it opened in 1897. After Avondale, Priscilla worked for a short time as a Bible worker and missionary laborer, and when the first Seventh-day Adventist school was opened in the back rooms of the North Fitzroy church on April 23, 1900, she was appointed as an assistant teacher.<sup>16</sup> Later she taught at Warburton School<sup>17</sup> and the Osborne Park church school in Western Australia.<sup>18</sup> In 1918 Priscilla married George Burchill.<sup>19</sup>

After studying at Avondale, Lillian Prismall worked at the Bible Echo Publishing company, and in 1905 was appointed Secretary of the West Australian Tract Society.<sup>20</sup> Lillian was an organist at the North Fitzroy church and later at Perth Church.<sup>21</sup> In 1909 Lillian married Ferdinand Kingston, son of Quintus and Mary Kingston,<sup>22</sup> and their children were Vena (Mead), Olive (Hosken), Hector, Betty (Gardiner) and Allenby.

## The 1914–1918 War Years

During the war years, William Prismall held a number of community leadership positions, including Secretary-Treasurer of the Fairfield Progress Society. Insights into his high moral stance with respect to conscription, noncombatant status, and the voluntary Red Cross were obvious in his publications in the *Heidelberg News and Greensborough and Diamond Creek Chronicle*.<sup>23</sup> He was deeply saddened by the death of his son-in-law, Albert Anderson (son of Pastor A. W. Anderson), when in 1918 his Sopwith Camel aircraft crashed in France during the war.

By 1924, William Prismall was bedridden with severe arthritis, and he died at 76 years on September 2, 1929, in Kew, Victoria.<sup>24</sup> Lizzy Prismall testified that he was a devoted husband and kind father. She lived for almost 30 years after the death of William, passing away on July 7, 1958.<sup>25</sup>

## Legacy

William Prismall was an English Christian gentleman, and he, with his wife Ellen and his brother Charles, were founding lay members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia. William and Charles were especially interested in outreach through the publishing work. The modern breakfast cereal industry owes a great deal to their pioneering grain milling work. William's many descendants include several church pastors, missionaries, doctors, nurses, teachers, and administrators who have contributed to the spread of the gospel and growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific region.

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