

Dykes, Eva Beatrice (1893–1986)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

Eva B. Dykes, the first African American female to complete requirements for a Ph.D., was a respected scholar and educator at Howard University and Oakwood College (now a university), where she founded the school's renowned choral ensemble, the Aeolians.¹

Early Life and Education

Eva Beatrice Dykes was born in Washington, D.C., on August 13, 1893. Both her mother, Martha Ann Howard, and her father, James Stanley Dykes, attended Howard University in Washington where they met and were married. Martha Ann was the youngest of the four Howard children and had to drop out of school because of illness. Martha Ann's brother, Dr. James H. Howard, a medical doctor, would step in as a father figure since Eva's father, James Dykes, left the family when Eva was a young girl.

Eva attended the Teacher Training School of Howard University from grades one to four and then the Lucretia Mott Elementary School for grades five to eight. In 1910 she graduated from M Street High School (later renamed Dunbar High School). She followed in the footsteps of her parents and attended Howard University where she graduated with a B.A. in 1914, *summa cum laude*. No other student had ever graduated from Howard University with that distinction up to that time.²

Martha Ann later married Mr. Richard Pumphrey, a contractor, and her three small children (Florence, Eva, Anita) began to call their mother "Pum Pum." The family of five moved in with Martha Ann's brother, Dr. Howard, who owned a large eight room house near Howard University. Eva exhibited musical talent at an early age and Dr. Howard a piano for her and another one for her sister Florence (nicknamed Flossie). They both practiced at six o'clock every morning. Flossie usually practiced on the piano in the front living room and gave piano lessons to young students and Eva would use the piano in the rear. Such consistent practice enabled Eva to be an accomplished musician. At age seven, she played piano and organ on Sundays for several local churches and later she accompanied many of the outstanding vocalists and violinists in the Washington area.

Pinnacle Achievement and Faith Commitment

While attending Howard University Eva was initiated into the Alpha chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, was the valedictorian, and also voted the most versatile student by her senior class. After she taught at Walden University in Nashville, Tennessee, for one year (1914-15), Dr. Howard convinced Eva to attend Radcliffe College (the female college of Harvard University). Her B.A. *summa cum laude* from Howard, a black university, did not impress Radcliffe so they required her to do a second B.A. Undaunted and undiscouraged, she plunged into her work graduating with a second B.A. in 1917, *magna cum laude*, and a M.A. in 1918. While at Radcliffe she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Eva and her mother had grown up in the Methodist church but her uncle, Dr. Howard, was an Adventist. His witness and the new minister at Ephesus church, P. Gustavus Rodgers, made a big impression on Eva. Rodgers was a powerful evangelist and following one of his tent efforts conducted while Eva was at Radcliffe, Eva's mother joined



the Ephesus church. A little later that year Rodgers conducted another tent effort and on December 5, 1920, Eva was baptized with twenty-eight candidates. This event changed the focus and direction of her life.

In September 1920 Eva Dykes began teaching at Dunbar High School, and on March 21, 1921 completed the oral defense of her 644-page dissertation entitled "Alexander Pope and His influence in America from 1810 to 1850," which explored the attitudes of Alexander Pope towards slavery and his sympathy with the African American slaves. She thus became the first black woman in America to complete the requirements for a doctoral degree. However, because Radcliffe College held its graduation ceremonies later in the spring (she received her degree on June 22, 1921), she was the third black female to graduate with a Ph.D. that year, behind Georgiana R. Simpson (June 14, 1921, University of Chicago) and Sadie Tanner Mossell (June 15, 1921, University of Pennsylvania).³ By a quirk of commencement scheduling, the first became last. She was, however, the first black student to graduate with a doctorate from Radcliffe College and the first black female in America to receive a Ph.D. in English Philology.

Howard University Professor

After her graduation from Radcliffe, Dr. Dykes continued to teach at Dunbar High School until 1929. Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Howard University's thirteenth and first black president, elected to the office in 1926, had already gained recognition as a persevering worker for his people. A minister and powerful orator, he began to negotiate with the federal government for an annual appropriation. Wanting more than just better buildings, he dreamed of the most qualified faculty available. Word of Dr. Dykes' amazing teaching abilities circulated in Washington's educational circles, making her a desirable prospect for Johnson's dream faculty.

Some years later in an address before the students and faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, then located in Takoma Park, Washington, D. C., Mordecai Johnson explained the complications that her arrival caused and the surprise of a letter from her:

I feel especially near to you in this church, too, because one of the finest teachers I have ever known came from your church. Her name is Dr. Eva B. Dykes. When I first came to Howard University, her name was brought to my attention in a peculiar way. She had received the Doctor's degree sometime earlier from Radcliffe, and we were about to engage her as a teacher.

Prior to taking the job, she had a conference with the Dean, saying, "Before you conclude this contract there is one thing you should know about me. I do not know if after you hear this you will wish to employ me or not, but I feel I must tell you I am a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and beginning at sundown on Friday until sundown Saturday I will be unable to do any work for the university, for in that period my church is foremost in my allegiance, and I shall feel under obligation to do whatever they wish me to do and will be able to give no service to the university." The Dean brought her letter to me (he was the first Negro in the United States to get his degree in Germany) and said, "Mr. President, this is a very sad matter. I suppose this finishes it. We cannot employ this young woman. What a tragedy!" But I said to the Dean, "This does settle it. This makes certain we are going to employ this young woman."

"What do you mean, Mr. President? We cannot hire someone who has reservations about service."

I replied, "This is not a reservation but an affirmation. And I would further suggest that any woman who has the center of her life so dedicated is worth keeping, and we should not run the risk of losing a young person of that type. She will be just as loyal to the University the other six days as she is to her church on the Sabbath."

Dr. Dykes went on to reward the faith that Mordecai Johnson had placed in her. She won several teaching awards during her 15 years of service at Howard University. Her publications include *Readings from Negro Authors for Schools and Colleges*, co-authored with Lorenzo Dow Turner and Otelia Cromwell (1931) and *The Negro in English Romantic Thought: Or a Study in Sympathy for the Oppressed* (1942).

In 1934 Dykes began writing a column in *Message* magazine, the Adventist missionary magazine for African American readers. She continued writing the column for fifty years, until 1984.

Oakwood and the Aeolians

At Oakwood Junior College, the Adventist school for African Americans located in Huntsville, Alabama, it was still the case in the early 1930s that the majority of the faculty was white. Following a strategically timed student strike in 1931, the students requested that J. L. Tucker be the last white president. The predominantly white board acceded, and J. L. Moran became Oakwood's first black president in 1932. His goal was to create an outstanding black faculty and make Oakwood a fully accredited senior college. Moran tried several times to get Dr. Dykes to come to teach at Oakwood, but her uncle advised her that she probably could do more good for the church where she was.

With prayerful hesitancy she declined all of Moran's offers. Finally, in 1944, she decided she would join the faculty of the then small and unaccredited college as the Chair of the English Department. Her salary would be \$41 a week. President Moran told her that he was receiving \$42 and that the board insisted that the president make at least one dollar more than the teaching faculty. After taking out of her salary her rent, electricity, and so forth, she would have only \$25 a week to take care of food and other living expenses. Her co-workers at Howard could not believe that she would leave the best black college in the country for such a small salary and some promised to send her some money

to help with expenses.

Leaving Howard meant parting from some of the best-known educators and black leaders in the world. She had stood side-by-side with Dr. Ralph Bunche, diplomat and U.N. mediator; Todd Duncan, world-famous baritone singer; Alain LeRoy Locke, who was the first man of color to be a Rhodes scholar; Charles Harris Wesley, former president of Wilberforce University; Ernest E. Just, a biologist of unusual fame; Camille Nickerson, concert artist and teacher; and Louis Vaughn Jones, a famous violinist. All of them were or had been Howard professors and her colleagues.

In 1944 Dr. Dykes and her mother, Pum Pum, got on the train and took the long trip south to Huntsville, at that time a very small segregated town with a population of fourteen thousand. While they waited in the segregated colored waiting room for someone from the college to pick them up they saw the signs indicating colored restrooms and colored drinking fountains. On the way to Oakwood they passed the little Huntsville Negro Library with just a few books and also passed the large white library. She passed the Huntsville hospital and was told that if she ever got sick, she would have to enter through the rear door to be treated in the small rear wing specifically sectioned off for colored patients. But she had made her decision to be useful to humanity and especially to the church she loved, and she never regretted her decision to go south to Oakwood.

Dr. Dykes was the first faculty member at Oakwood to hold a doctorate and was instrumental in the college's attaining full senior college accreditation by chairing the accreditation committee. In 1947 Dykes founded and directed the musical group, the Aeolians, and gave the choral group its unique name and special sound. During the summers, Dr. Dykes and the Aeolians would travel to large churches and camp meetings with their impressive performances and recruit students for Oakwood, helping the school grow.

Dr. Dykes was a difficult but fair teacher. Many of the students did not have a good background in the English language when they arrived but she worked with those who wanted to succeed. Most of the black pastors, teachers, and other leaders in the Adventist church came under her influence and spoke effectively and eloquently by the time they left Oakwood.

Dykes retired in 1968 but was asked to return to Oakwood to teach in 1970 and she continued until 1975. In 1973, in recognition of her outstanding career as a dedicated educator and mentor of young people, Dr. Dykes received the Certificate of Merit from the General Conference Department of Education. Also, in 1973, the newly completed Oakwood University Library was named in her honor. In 1975, Dr. Dykes was recognized at the General Conference session in Vienna, Austria, for her contribution to Christian education. In 1980 she was made a professor emerita.

Legacy

Eva B. Dykes died in Huntsville, at her beloved Oakwood College on October 29, 1986, at the age of ninety-three.

Among those who gathered to mourn her death and celebrate her life were educators and administrators, the full college choir, family members and old friends, church officials and members, and former and current students. All were conscious of the passing greatness. Jannith Lewis, director of the Eva B. Dykes Library at Oakwood, traced the career of this devoted teacher. She concluded by saying of Dr. Dykes: "She was dynamic, inspiring, exacting, tireless, an excellent role model. She used Jesus Christ as her model. She was a great 'little giant,' small in stature but large in heart."

A silent tribute was paid to Dr. Dykes in 2017 when the Oakwood Aeolians competed in the Choir of the World Competition during the International Musical Eisteddfod in Llangollen, Wales. The Welsh Eisteddfod was created in 1947, the same year Dr. Dykes created the Aeolians, to help bring peace through music to a world torn apart by World War II. Under the direction of Dr. Jason Max Ferdinand the Aeolians were awarded the coveted first place 2017 Choir of the World Pavarotti Trophy.⁴

SOURCES

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Johns, Robert L. "Eva B. Dykes." In Jessica Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women*. Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992.

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Williams, DeWitt S. *She Fulfilled the Impossible Dream: The Story of Eva B. Dykes* Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985.

NOTES

1. Though some particulars are more specifically documented below, this article is based on the author's biography *She Fulfilled the Impossible Dream: The Story of Eva B. Dykes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985).?
2. "Eva B. Dykes," *Howard University Record* 15, no. 8 (June 1921): 467.?
3. Robert L. Johns, "Eva B. Dykes," in Jessica Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992), 304-305.?
4. Karen Benn Marshall, "2017 Choir of the World Winners," *Oakwood Magazine*, Summer 2017, 12.?

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