

Burns, Nelson Clement Henry (1896–1979) and Colina Ethel (Brown) (1900–1973)



Nelson Burns

Photo courtesy of the Service Files, South Pacific Division.

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

Pastor Nelson Burns and his wife, Colina, worked in Australia, New Zealand, India, and Fiji, where Pastor Burns was a greatly respected pastor, evangelist, missionary, and teacher as well as chair of the Bible department at Avondale College for 14 years.

Early Life, Education, and Marriage

Nelson Clement Henry Burns was born in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, on December 22, 1896.¹ He was the second of six children born into the family. Only he and three others, Dora, Eric, and Chester, were still alive in 1959 at the time of their mother's death.² Burns's parents, Henry Martin and Clementina Augustina (Powell) Burns, became Seventh-day Adventists in 1905.³ They moved from Melbourne to Cooranbong, New South Wales (NSW), so that their children could be educated at the Australasian Missionary College.⁴ Nelson was baptized in 1912, largely through the influence of his home and his study at the Australasian Missionary College, where according to his own recollection, he was a student, most probably a day student, between 1905 and 1915.⁵ In 1912, while a student, he gained an associate diploma from the London College of Music in violin.⁶

He commenced work for the denomination in November 1915.⁷ After assisting with a tent mission in Quirindi and Tamworth (NSW) over that year-end, his initial full-time appointment was to evangelism in Victoria. He described himself as a “tent-master” because a number of the evangelistic programs were conducted in a large tent, and the tent master role was usually assigned to the youngest single male on the evangelistic team. At just 19 years of age, he qualified for the role.⁸ He assisted Pastor N. J. Waldorf in 1916 at Hawksburn and Prahran, and in 1917 at Balaclava and then Elsternwick, all in Victoria.⁹ At this time, N. J. Waldorf reported:

“At the Elsternwick camp-meeting it was decided that the writer, in company with Brethren Ross James and Nelson Burns, and Sisters Brown and Cozens, should continue the interest aroused by the Balaclava mission and the camp-meeting, which were held in the same vicinity, the mission having commenced a few weeks beforehand.

Accordingly we pitched the tent about half a mile from the camp-ground, on a vacant lot near the Elsternwick railway station. This territory had not been worked since Pastor Woods held meetings here nine years ago. Brother James remained only a few weeks, being called away to join Pastor Rogers in an effort in the country. A little later a call came for help in the Coburg mission, which is conducted by Pastor Woods and others, and Sister Cozens responded and joined the mission there. This left Brother Burns, Sister Brown, and the writer to continue the work.”¹⁰

In 1918 Burns was located in Orbost in the Gippsland region of Victoria, where he was able to raise up a company of Seventh-day Adventists.¹¹ Then, at a time when many Australian Seventh-day Adventists were being invited to work in Southern Asia,¹² Burns received an invitation to engage in mission service in India¹³ at the Australasian Union Conference held at the Australasian Missionary College, October 2–16, 1918.¹⁴

Service in India, Australia, and Fiji

Nelson Burns served in the Southern Asia Division until 1926, primarily in Northern India in the Punjab region.¹⁵ In his first year he wrote:

After seven months of study in Lucknow and Mussoorie, a hill station in the great Himalayas, the first-year Urdu examinations were passed, and I was sent to one of our missions in the Punjab. Our bungalow at Chichoki Mallian is seventeen miles from Lahore, the capital, and about six hundred miles north west of Lucknow.¹⁶

While he was serving in India, Colina Ethel Brown, having just graduated from the Australasian Missionary College in 1920, agreed to marry him.¹⁷ She was 20 years of age, having been born on October 9, 1900, at Mount Gambier, South Australia.¹⁸ She traveled to Colombo in Ceylon, and they were married there on November 16, 1920.¹⁹ From Colombo, it was a long, arduous journey to the place of their labor near Lahore in the Punjab region.²⁰ Their first child, Colin Aylesbury Burns, was born in 1923 in India.²¹

After seven years in India, Nelson returned with his family in May 1926 to evangelistic work in South Australia. While there, he was ordained on April 7, 1928.²² After just two years in South Australia, they were invited to work in Fiji, where Burns worked particularly with the Indian population from May 1928 through May 1933. While Nelson and Colina were serving in Fiji, their daughter, Ameera Shirley Burns, was born in Suva in 1932.²³ After five years in Fiji, from May 1933 through to August 1934, Nelson took 18 months leave for self-funded study at Walla Walla College in the Northwestern United States, where he completed his bachelor of theology degree. After six more months in Fiji, the Burns family returned to Australia in late 1934. Nelson worked as an evangelist in New South Wales (NSW), followed by similar service in both North New Zealand and Tasmania.

Chair of the Bible Department at Avondale College

In early 1945 Nelson Burns joined the faculty at Avondale College, where he spent 14 years teaching ministerial students as chair of the Bible Department. His years at Avondale were broken by 18 months' study leave at the Adventist Seminary in the United States from mid-1946, where he completed a master's degree. With Desmond Ford joining the Avondale College faculty with his first Ph.D. in 1961, Burns was called to Queensland for one year before retiring. He wrote on his Sustentation Fund Application, "Not incapacitated but with 46 years' service, choose to retire."²⁴

"Nubby," as he was affectionately known, was profoundly shaped by his service as a missionary to India and his years in Fiji. These early experiences colored the years that followed and were an endless source of sermon illustrations. "When I was in the Punjab . . ." became a familiar sermon introduction to two generations of students at Avondale. Burns saw the good in everyone, even when the Discipline Committee of the college could not, and he was an able advocate in such meetings. On one occasion when asked to comment on one student in trouble, he did not respond quickly enough, which led the committee chairman to declare, "Then he must be hopeless!"²⁵

His preaching ability was exceptional, and the students looked forward to his Friday night vespers programs at Avondale. They insisted that he could find a sermon illustration anywhere, including the contents of his car glove box or off the label of a Sanitarium Health Food Company can! Nelson Burns was much more interested in the character and spiritual life of his students than their grades, and his approach to marking was unconventional at best. At a time when Avondale was making the transition into a degree-granting institution, his grades were seriously inflated, and this caused concern among his faculty peers. On one occasion, his colleague Pastor A. F. J. Kranz asked him how he could get through his marking so quickly when compared with other faculty members. His response was, "Well, I look at the name and then think, 'Well, he is such a godly boy, I'll give him a B'; a response that, of course, did nothing to diminish the concerns of his fellow lecturers."²⁶

Summary of Service²⁷

Nov. 1915–Dec. 1918	Victorian Conference	Evangelism	3 years
Jan. 1919–May 1926	India	Evangelism	7 years
May 1926–May 1928	South Australia Conference	Evangelism	2 years
May 1928–May 1933	Fiji Mission	Evangelism	5 years
May 1933–Aug. 1934	Walla Walla	Study leave	1.5 years
Aug. 1934–Dec. 1934	Fiji Mission	Evangelism	0.5 year
Jan. 1935–Dec. 1936	Sydney, South NSW Conference	Evangelism	2 years
Jan. 1937–Dec. 1941	North New Zealand Conference	Evangelism	5 years
Jan. 1942–Dec. 1944	Tasmania	Evangelism	3 years
Jan. 1945–June 1946	Australasian Missionary College	Teaching	1.5 years
June 1946–Dec. 1947	SDA Seminary	Study leave	1.5 years
Jan. 1948–Dec. 1960	Australasian Missionary College	Teaching	13 years
Jan. 1961–Dec. 1961	South Queensland Conference	Pastoral evangelism	1 year

Retirement

Burns retired at age 65 in December 1961.²⁸ Colina, his partner of 52 years, died on February 24, 1973, at 72 years of age.²⁹ After Colina died, Nelson moved into the Coronella Retirement Village. There, those in leadership wisely appointed him honorary chaplain, and soon his sparkle was back. He visited, organized worships, and on occasion took great delight when introducing the speaker of the day as one of “his boys.”³⁰

Pastor Burns, to quote a tribute later written about him, “never lost his dignity or eloquence.”³¹ When on Wednesday, April 18, 1979, he stood up in the Coronella dining room to pronounce what was to be his final blessing at the noonday meal, it was a beautiful prayer. Seconds later, he collapsed. An hour later, his lips were sealed. He was 82.³²

Legacy

In the kingdom, generations of his “boys and girls” will have the opportunity to rise up and call him blessed, to hear that fine musician sing and play his beloved violin once more, and speak again of the Jesus he loved. “So many will be there, because of a loving and lovable Christian called ‘Nubby.’”³³

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NOTES

1. Nelson Clement Henry Burns Biographical Information, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, Folder: "Burns, Nelson Clement Henry," Document: "Biographical Information Blank, September 17, 1950." Another Biographical Information Blank filled out in Burn's handwriting gives his birth year as 1897 (Nelson Clement Henry Burns Biographical Information, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, Folder: "Burns, Nelson Clement Henry," Document: "Biographical Information Blank, September 8, 1941."). Further confusing the issue is that the registration of his birth apparently did not take place until 1899, and when registered, he was registered as Clement Nelson Henry Burns (Melbourne, Victoria, Birth registration no. 16463 [registered in 1899], Clement Nelson Henry Burns, Register of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, <https://online.justice.vic.gov.au/bdm/indexsearch.doj>).
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20. Ibid.
21. L. R. Burns, "Life-Sketch of Pastor Nelson Burns," *Australasian Record and Advent World Survey*, May 21, 1979, 14.
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25. L. R. Burns, "Life-Sketch"; "A Tribute to 'Nubby' (Pastor N. C. Burns) by one of his boys," *Australasian Record and Advent World Survey*, May 21, 1979, 14.
26. Personal knowledge of the author as a student at Avondale College.

27. Summary derived with some minor amendments from Nelson Clement Henry Burns Sustentation Fund Records, "Sustentation Fund Application."

28. Nelson Clement Burns Sustentation Fund Records, "Sustentation Fund Application."

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30. L. R. Burns, "Life-Sketch."

31. "A Tribute to 'Nubby.'"

32. Ibid.; Ken Low, "Nelson Clement Henry Burns," *Australasian Record and Advent World Survey*, May 21, 1979, 15.

33. L. R. Burns, "Life-Sketch."

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