

Parr, Robert Henry

(1920–2013)

GILBERT M. VALENTINE

Gilbert M. Valentine, Ph.D. has served internationally in teaching and senior administrative roles in Adventist higher education in Europe, Asia, the South Pacific and North America. He has written extensively in Adventist studies and has authored several books, including biographies of *W. W. Prescott* (2005) and *J. N. Andrews* (2019). *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) explored the political influence of Ellen White. He has also written for the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013).

Highly esteemed author and editor Robert (Bob) H. Parr served the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in the South Pacific for 37 years in full-time employment as educator, pastor, and church administrator, and in retirement as part-time writer and prison chaplain. He is best known for his 14 years as editor of the *Australasian Record*, the 16-page church weekly, and the *Signs of the Times*, the church's outreach journal, to both of which he brought a fresh vibrant tone, making them highly effective mediums of communication during the late 1960s and 1970s.



Robert Henry Parr, c. 1970s.

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

Family Background and Education (1920–1939)

Robert Parr was born May 9, 1920, the only son of Charles Henry and Marie Louise Parr (née Moore), Methodist parents in the suburb of Woolloowin, North Brisbane, Queensland. His father was a Sunday school superintendent and his mother a pianist at their local church. His maternal grandfather was a Methodist lay preacher who held a high position in the Brisbane General Post Office and could trace his lineage back to Sir Thomas More of Canterbury, who tangled fatefully with Henry VIII. His father enlisted as an infantryman in World War I and served at and survived Gallipoli, though severely injured.¹

Parr started school at Cunnamulla in the far west of Queensland, where his father had gone to work as an ambulance service superintendent.² When the family returned to Brisbane, he continued his elementary

schooling at the Toowong State School.³ During his teen years he attended the prestigious Brisbane Grammar School (BGS), overlooking Roma Street Park, near the city center. BGS was the oldest boys secondary school in the state capital, known widely for its rigorous British curriculum and which, in 1914, some alumni claimed to be “the Eton of Australia.”⁴

In 1929 Parr’s mother, Marie Louisa (née Moore) (1895–1955) began attending the 26-month-long evangelistic campaign held in a central Brisbane theater by Roy Allan Anderson. She was one of 230 baptized as a result of the meetings, and with her, Robert began attending the Redhill Seventh-day Adventist Church in spite of his father’s opposition. To assist family finances following the economic recession, he completed school at age 15 and took employment as a delivery van assistant with the Sanitarium Health Food Company in 1936 and 1937, studying for his Leaving Certificate examination in the evenings. After his baptism at age 17 at Redhill church in 1937 he undertook the two-year teacher training course at the Australasian Missionary College (AMC) in Cooranbong, NSW, graduating in 1939. His parents later moved to Sandgate and then to Redcliff, where in her later years his mother was a leading activist in the building of the Redcliff Adventist Church, near to her home.⁵

Teaching and Educational Editing (1940–1966)

Following graduation Parr began his career as a 19-year-old secondary school teacher in 1940 with a class of 17-year-olds at Avondale Central School, on the campus of AMC. On April 9, 1942, at the Ryde church in North Sydney he married Aleathea Daisy Cozens, with whom he had formed a friendship during college years. She was the New Zealand-born daughter of Benjamin and Minnie Cozens. The following year Parr was called to be headmaster of the SDA school at 175 Kemp Street, Hamilton, Newcastle—an elementary school that extended to three years of high school. In 1947 he oversaw the addition of two additional grades enabling it to offer a full secondary program. In the six years that the couple lived in Newcastle three children were born to the family: Mareta Grace, Jennifer Joy, and Gregory Charles.

In 1950 Parr was appointed to be headmaster of the church’s only exclusively post-primary school operated in a large converted residence in Burwood, Sydney. With steadily increasing enrollment, he managed, in 1953, the transition of the school to modern purpose-built buildings on a new two-and-a-half-acre site at 159 Albert Road, Strathfield. A year after the transition, enrollment levels required staff adjustments. The school was overstaffed by one and rather than make another teacher redundant, colleague Trevor Lloyd later recalled, Bob volunteered his own resignation. It was accepted, and Parr left denominational employment for a time.⁶

Parr succeeded in obtaining an appointment, at the commencement of 1954, as English master at Sydney Grammar School (SGS), overlooking Hyde Park at the heart of the state capital’s civic center. Founded in 1854 by an act of Parliament to prepare students for the then “fledgling” Sydney University, the school was Sydney’s oldest secondary school and had a prized reputation for academic excellence.⁷ Two years later, in 1956, he

completed his BA degree with the University of Queensland through its extramural program and later added a graduate diploma in diagnostic reading (1958). An exceptional poet, he won several prizes for his work from the University of Queensland.⁸ Parr taught at SGS for five years. Sometime near the end of the 1959 academic year he was persuaded to take on the role of educational editor with the Shakespeare Head Publishing Company on Elizabeth Street, Sydney, which, as a unit of Sir Frank Packer's Consolidated Press, specialized in school textbooks and Australian literature. During the next seven years this role acquainted him intimately with the print and editorial processes of a large commercial publishing operation. During this period he regularly contributed articles to the international church's *Youth's Instructor* and developed a reputation as a much-in-demand speaker at Adventist youth camps and youth events across Australia. His quick wit and rollicking good humor made him a top choice and standard setter as master of ceremonies for "unnumbered concerts" and youth variety programs, observed his colleague Trevor Lloyd.⁹ The unexpected passing of Parr's wife, Aleathea, on September 26, 1966, brought great sorrow to Parr and his family and deep shock to the Concord church, where she had been actively involved. She was buried at the Northern Suburbs Lawn Cemetery.¹⁰

Denominational Editor and Conference President (1967–1985)

A few months after the loss of his wife, Parr attended a year-end Annual Council at church headquarters, where concern was expressed about the parlous state of the Church's weekly, the *Australasian Record*. Almost whimsically, he volunteered to "look after it." At the time, Parr later observed, it was being produced without a lot of "creativity or innovation," by "chaps in high places."¹¹ A division officer functioned as the titular editor, but it was being put together by retired minister W. E. Battye from reports coming into church headquarters. Parr's offer was enthusiastically accepted. His hope for the paper, he later explained, was to try to "brighten it up a bit."¹² He began his editorial work in the church office at 148 Fox Valley Road, Wahroonga, but within a few months moved to Warburton, Victoria, to be near the Signs Publishing Company, the denominational publisher. His name first appeared on the masthead of the magazine on March 13, 1967. At the same time he took on editorial responsibility for the monthly *Signs of the Times* and the bimonthly *Good Health*.

With his creative imagination, light humor, and well-honed writing skills, Parr brought a vitality to the magazines that soon led to increased circulation, as both content and editorial style engaged readers. His editorials took on "more substance" and were marked by pastoral insight, an awareness of current issues, wit, a passion for the gospel, and a freshness that made them, for many national as well as overseas readers, the first page to turn to each week.¹³ For many readers his more memorable reflections in the magazine were clever self-deprecating conversations he narrated between himself as *Record* editor and his other self as the editor of *Signs*. Often he was able to portray very effectively the different sides of an issue in a church discussion in an illuminating imagined debate between his two editorial selves or with himself as an imagined correspondent.¹⁴ Editorials were often republished by publishing houses overseas and for the *British Messenger* he was formally listed as a regular "contributing editor."¹⁵

A month after he moved into the editorial chair, he renamed the back page of the *Record* "Flashpoint" and turned it into a conversational page of news about current events in the church, transfers of personnel or church family news that enabled him to bond with his readers in a unique and sustained way.¹⁶ On June 19, 1967, he began the inclusion of a witty home truth or profound aphorism at the bottom of the last page as a concluding note in each issue under the lead "Finally Brethren." The feature became a captivating hit with readers who looked to these last lines almost as eagerly as they looked to the editorial. His final item appeared with the usual touch of humor in the last issue he edited in 1981 as "Finally, finally, finally brethren . . . Some people are like blisters; they appear only after the work is done."¹⁷ As a later editor noted: "More than any editor before or since, Parr developed a strong personal following as he developed a chatty, inclusive style in the *Record* that carried the magazine despite some of its other content."¹⁸ David Marshall, editor at the church's Stanborough Press in the United Kingdom, observed that Parr's distinctive style did not consist in "being short and saying like it is," as Marshall had himself been taught. Parr aimed, rather, first to "engage" the reader and then "to take him on a journey. That journey might be all the way from Dan to Beersheba, but by journey's end the reader had been to Calvary and was richer by having grasped Bob's latest take on the good news."¹⁹ Marshall saw Parr's two "great strengths" as "the clarity of his grasp of the objective gospel and its priority over everything else," and his skill in communicating it.²⁰

On May 6, 1968, Parr married Fernella (Fern) Butler, the youngest daughter of missionary, pastor, Avondale Business teacher, and church administrator, Allan Butler and his wife, Hazel (née Hoskins).²¹ Fern had served for many years as the secretary to the Division treasurer.²² Later that same year, in September, Parr was ordained to the gospel ministry. During the couple's Warburton years, in addition to his editorial duties Parr served for an extended period as senior elder of the church at Warburton, and continued to have a stream of speaking appointments at local churches, camp meetings, and youth camps. He sought to maintain balance by developing skill as a golfer (and was proud of his tallies), and in addition, with Fern's support and as a service to his local community and its youth, he served as district parole officer for the Victorian state juvenile justice system.²³

During the late 1970s Parr identified with the righteousness by faith emphasis of Avondale Theology Department chair, Desmond Ford, and in Ford's efforts to provide a corrective to a spiritually damaging legalistic perfectionism that had long been a strand in the Australian SDA Church. Both believed that such teaching robbed church members of what they believed was a genuine biblically based Christian assurance. When in early 1980 Ford was given a leave of absence from his teaching post at Pacific Union College for a problematic public presentation he had given in October 1979, Parr felt constrained to defend his colleague because he perceived he was being unfairly "made the scapegoat" when other trusted Adventist scholars such as *The SDA Bible Commentary* associate editor Raymond F. Cottrell had publicly said the same things if not more.²⁴ He found this "hypocrisy" hard to deal with. His editorials, as David Marshall later explained, written with a deep sense of loyalty to the Church and a faithfulness to the gospel, began to "particularize the failings of [the] Church," a

development that before long cost Parr the confidence of harried division administrators in Sydney. In November 1980 he was notified that he would not be appointed to another term as editor. The “precipitate departure from his editorial chair” was seen by many, Marshall reported, as “a blow to all those who appreciate good writing and believe in the objective gospel and the importance of its proclamation to the world and within the Church.”²⁵ Parr’s concluding editorial, “The Medicine of a Merry Heart,” expressed a cheerful confidence in the reign of God and the assurance of the good news of Jesus, which, with a touch of his irrepressible good humor and hyperbole, he observed, was so “wonderful” that it was “enough to put a smile on the face of a statue.”²⁶

Members of the Greater Sydney Conference constituency, faced with what they viewed as a providential presidential vacancy at the end of 1980, took the opportunity of Parr’s release from the editorship, and, appreciating his courage, his pastoral skill, and gospel emphasis, called him to be their next conference president. For five years Parr served as a highly valued conference leader nurturing a compassionate environment for workers during the doctrinally troubled early 1980s. Trevor Lloyd reports that during Parr’s administration, there was “the loss of not one pastor on doctrinal grounds.”²⁷ During this period Parr sponsored renewed evangelistic endeavors, enthusiastically resourcing evangelist John Carter’s five-month-long Sydney Opera House meetings and his later giant, seven-pole tent effort in the suburb of Concord. Carter recalls Parr supporting both programs in practical ways, such as taking on security duty or other routine duties behind the scenes, as well as ensuring conference finance.²⁸

Church Pastor and Retirement (1985–2013)

At age 65 Parr sought release from the burden of conference administration and secured an appointment as pastor of the Castle Hill Adventist Church in Sydney’s northwest, where he and Fern, for five years, were deeply appreciated as a pastoral team, conservative in values but “caring, thoughtful, and compassionate,” reported longtime church elder Jeanette Kemp.²⁹ During these years, at various times, the smaller congregations at Thornleigh, Epping, and Guildford churches also came under his pastoral care, and he also found time to embrace a fruitful prison ministry that involved being registered for on-call chaplaincy functions at a number of regional New South Wales jails.

Parr formally retired from denominational employment in 1990, but writing was never something he was able to let go and he continued to have success with the publishing of his articles in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. One of his last assignments was the 460-page centennial history of the Sanitarium Health Food Company— *What Hath God Wrought!*—which he wrote with the assistance of researcher Glynn Litster. This 1996 publication brought to 14 the number of books authored by the veteran editor, the best known of which were *Sparrow Among the Eagles: A Collection of Stories for Adult Christians* and *3.16: The Joy of the Gospel*.³⁰

During the last six years of his life in the Avondale Retirement Village in Cooranbong, Parr suffered ill health and a series of strokes that eventually severely limited his mobility and his awareness. He died at the age of 90 on August 2, 2013, and, following a funeral service on August 5, was interred in the Avondale Cemetery.

Contribution

Robert Parr served as one of South Pacific Adventism's most respected and influential denominational editors. He enlivened its magazines through his creative writing in ways that energetically engaged the Church's readers, particularly its younger generation. The astutely exercised gift of his humor and his ability to enable people to laugh at themselves helped ease moments of tension and difficulty in a wide range of situations. His editorial skill, pastoral ministry, and conference leadership did much to enable the church to navigate successfully a difficult period in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

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NOTES

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14. A good example of such creative self-deprecating conversation is his farewell "Flashpoint," *Australasian Record*, January 26, 1981, 16.
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