

Wright, Phillip James (1912–1941)

MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Phillip Wright was an Adventist nurse and mission administrator who trained at the Sydney Sanitarium. He moved into evangelistic work and was for a time the superintendent of the Eastern Polynesian Mission based at Papeete, Tahiti.

Early Life, Education, and Marriage

Phillip James Wright was born in Auckland, New Zealand, on July 24, 1912, of Seventh-day Adventist parents. He was baptized when he was fourteen years of age. His later teenage years were spent working in the Auckland Sanitarium Health Food factory and the North New Zealand Conference office.¹

Seeking to qualify himself for wider service, Wright enrolled in the three-year nursing course at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital in 1933. He graduated in the 1935 class,² but instead of continuing with nursing, he was appointed to assist in evangelistic work in Launceston, Tasmania, for much of 1936.³ Toward the end of that year he was asked to cross over to King Island to nurture some individuals who had shown an interest in Adventism.⁴

During his nursing trainee years he had courted Jessie Moncrieff, a fellow nurse from Albany, Western Australia, who had graduated in the 1933 class and continued to nurse.⁵ They were given leave from their work to marry



Phillip and Jessie Wright, c. 1938.

Photo courtesy of South Pacific Division Heritage Centre.

on March 10, 1937, in the Mont Albert church, Melbourne.⁶ They returned to the northeast of Tasmania to conduct evangelism in the Bridport/Scottsdale district.⁷ This move was, in effect, a waiting period until a suitable opening was found for them in the Pacific Islands.

Overseas Service

By September 1937, plans were well under way for the Wrights' transfer to Papeete, Tahiti. Phillip Wright was appointed to be superintendent of the Eastern Polynesian Mission. They sailed from Sydney on the *Awatea* to New Zealand on October 22, from there they took the *Niagara* to Fiji and the *Limerick* to Papeete.⁸ While in Fiji, Wright addressed the first graduation class at Vatuvonu Central School.⁹

The Eastern Polynesian Mission formed the eastern edge of the Australasian Union Conference territory, a scattered area of responsibility that included Pitcairn Island. A few national workers and a European teacher on Pitcairn were under Wright's direction. A national at the mission press produced both a monthly paper and the Sabbath School pamphlets for Tahiti and Raratonga. When Wright first arrived, he reported a membership of 101.¹⁰ It rose to 141 by 1940.¹¹

It was written of Wright that "under his energetic, efficient, and tireless leadership the work in that field experienced a real revival, and most encouraging growth and development ensued. New believers were added to the church and backsliders were reclaimed."¹² Part way through his mission tenure Wright was ordained.¹³ He demonstrated the potential for heavier responsibilities and was appointed to return to Tasmania for departmental work at the close of 1941. On December 10, he wrote to the Australasian Union Conference office from Tahiti, apparently in good health,¹⁴ but four days later he allegedly died of pneumonia.¹⁵ The report of his death sounded a note of incredulity at headquarters and rightly so because the oral tradition, which is remarkably accurate in the Pacific Islands, details an *affaire d'amour* between Wright and a married Japanese-Tahitian woman. According to the traditional story, Wright's wife discovered a bundle of love letters and confronted her husband about them. Sadly, the confrontation apparently led Wright to take his own life.¹⁶

Aftermath

Phillip Wright's tragic death cut short a life that promised much more. Jessie Wright returned to Australia with her two young daughters and remarried two years later.¹⁷ Wright's name is included on a memorial fountain outside the Heritage Museum at his alma mater, the Sydney Adventist Hospital.

SOURCES

Adrian, H[erbert] W. "Tasmanian Conference Session." *Australasian Record*, March 30, 1936.

"As there is no shipping direct to Tahiti..." *Australasian Record*, November 1, 1937.

Deane, Arthur C. to Milton Hook, September 27, 1989. South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, Wahroonga, New South Wales. Box: 3418. Folder: "French Polynesia."

"Excerpts from Mission Letters." *Australasian Record*, November 3, 1941.

"For Ordination and Credentials." *Australasian Record*, October 2, 1939.

Harker, H[arold] C. 1938. "Scottsdale and Bridport, Tasmania." *Australasian Record*, February 14, 1938.

Jacobson, A[rthur] G. "Minchin-Wright." *Australasian Record*, September 13, 1943.

Meyers, H[arold] J. "Wright-Moncrieff." *Australasian Record*, April 12, 1937.

Pretyman, C[ecil] H. "Graduation of Nurses at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital." *Australasian Record*, January 8, 1934.

Renn, W[illiam] S. "Tasmanian Conference Session." *Australasian Record*, April 12, 1937.

Richards, M. Ila. "Sanitarium Nurses Graduation Exercises." *Australasian Record*, January 6, 1936.

Roenfelt, Erwin E. "Phillip James Wright." *Australasian Record*, January 26, 1942.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1937-1941.

Wright, P[hillip] J. "Why Limit God's Power?" *Australasian Record*, March 30, 1936.

Wright, P[hillip] J. "Experiences on King Island." *Australasian Record*, November 16, 1936.

Wright, P[hillip] J. "The First Stage of Our Journey to Tahiti." *Australasian Record*, January 3, 1938.

Wright, P[hillip] J. "Arrival in Tahiti." *Australasian Record*, March 7, 1938.

Wright, P[hillip] J. "Tahiti Says 'Thank You.'" *Australasian Record*, March 18, 1940.

NOTES

1. Erwin E. Roenfelt, "Phillip James Wright," *Australasian Record*, January 26, 1942, 7.
2. Ila M. Richards, "Sanitarium Nurses Graduation Exercises," *Australasian Record*, January 6, 1936, 4-5.
3. H[erbert] W. Adrian, "Tasmanian Conference Session," *Australasian Record*, March 30, 1936, 5-6.
4. P[hillip] J. Wright, "Experiences on King Island," *Australasian Record*, November 16, 1936, 5.
5. C[ecil] H. Pretyman, "Graduation of Nurses at the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital," *Australasian Record*, January 8, 1934, 5.
6. H[arold] J. Meyers, "Wright-Moncrieff," *Australasian Record*, April 12, 1937, 6.

7. H[arold] C. Harker, "Scottsdale and Bridport," *Australasian Record*, February 14, 1938, 5.
8. "As there is no shipping direct to Tahiti..." *Australasian Record*, November 1, 1937, 8.
9. P[hilip] J. Wright, "The First Stage of Our Journey to Tahiti," *Australasian Record*, January 3, 1938, 3-4.
10. P[hilip] J. Wright, "Arrival in Tahiti," *Australasian Record*, March 7, 1938, 3.
11. P[hilip] J. Wright, "Tahiti Says 'Thank You,'" *Australasian Record*, March 18, 1940, 3-4.
12. Erwin E. Roenfelt, "Phillip James Wright," *Australasian Record*, January 26, 1942, 7.
13. "For Ordination and Credentials," *Australasian Record*, October 2, 1939, 7.
14. "Excerpts from Mission Letters," *Australasian Record*, November 3, 1941, 3-5.
15. Erwin E. Roenfelt, "Phillip James Wright," *Australasian Record*, January 26, 1942, 7.
16. Arthur C. Deane to Milton Hook, September 27, 1989, South Pacific Division of the General Conference Archives, Wairoa, New South Wales, box: 3418, folder: "French Polynesia;" Delphine Harris, interview by Milton Hook, Wairoa, New South Wales., March 3, 2018. Note: Further details of the woman involved can be found at <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/pedigree/landscape/LH77-8N7>.
17. A[rthur] G. Jacobson, "Minchin-Wright," *Australasian Record*, September 13, 1943, 7.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000