

Porter, Roscoe Celester (1859–1918)

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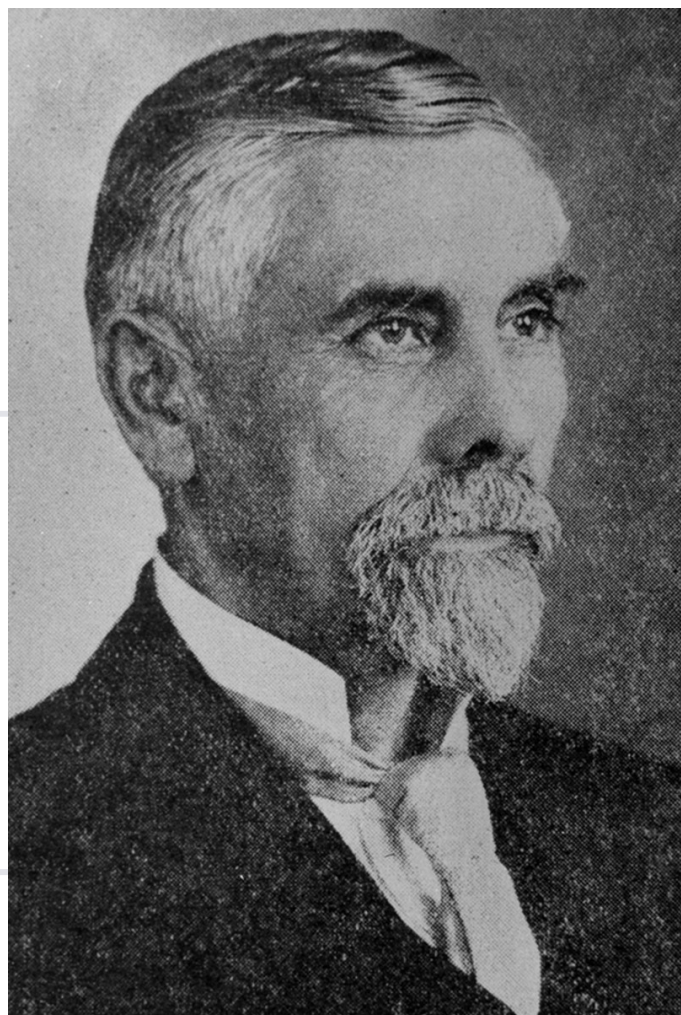
R. C. Porter served as president of several conferences in the United States and gave administrative leadership to early phases of the church's work in southern Africa and eastern Asia.

Heritage and Training

Roscoe Porter, commonly known as Ross, was born in Anamosa, eastern Iowa, on April 29, 1859, to Thomas and Mary Croft Porter. He was one of 12 children—six sons and six daughters.¹ He was raised in a Seventh-day Adventist home and at the age of 13 was baptized by George Butler at La Porte City, Iowa. His early schooling took place in the winters when he could absent himself from the family farm. In 1877 Ross attended the State Agricultural College at Ames, Iowa, and the following year advanced to Battle Creek College, Michigan.²

Minister and Conference President

In 1879, after a year at Battle Creek College, Porter began work as tent master for Daniel Nettleton, Jr., in the Nebraska Conference, then transferred to the Iowa Conference in 1880.³ On October 18, 1881, he married



R. C. Porter

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day
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Harriet or “Hattie” Irene Eggleston in her home in Caldwell County, Missouri.⁴ Together they ministered to rural Iowa communities in places such as Danbury, Farragut and Knoxville.⁵

Porter was ordained at the Iowa Conference camp meeting, Des Moines, in June 1886.⁶ During the same year he was engaged in tent evangelism at Independence and Winthrop.⁷ In 1889 he served as vice-president of the Iowa Tract Society and a member of the executive committee of the state Sabbath School Association.⁸

In 1890 Porter was elected as president of the Minnesota Conference and a year later transferred to the presidency of the New England Conference with headquarters at South Lancaster, Massachusetts.⁹ At the 1895 General Conference session he was elected to broader responsibility as superintendent of General Conference District 1 which covered the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states from Maine to Virginia. Also elected a member of the General Conference Executive Committee, his role was to give oversight and counsel to the conferences in District 1 on behalf of the General Conference and to report on the conditions and needs of the District to the GC Committee. He was also placed on the GC Transportation Committee and elected to the executive committee of the International Religious Liberty Association.¹⁰

Porter’s health broke down in early 1897 so he took six months to rest and do manual farm work to recuperate his emotional and physical energies. Feeling “much improved in health,” he accepted election to the presidency of the Ohio Conference in August 1897. The resumption of leadership was premature, however, and before the end of the year Porter relinquished his position and returned to his farm.¹¹

He resumed ministerial work in the Missouri Conference in 1901 and became president of the conference in 1903, leading a field that included 42 churches with a combined membership of approximately 2,000.¹² In 1906 he was elected president of the Southwestern Union Conference, an entity with headquarters at Keene, Texas, and having 4,225 members dispersed among 122 churches in the vast expanses of the Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas conferences.¹³

South African Union Conference President

In 1908 Porter was called overseas to serve as president of the South African Union Conference. Hattie adopted the role of editor for the union paper, the *South African Missionary*, serving until July 1912.¹⁴ The union comprised two conferences—Cape Colony and Natal-Transvaal; and six missions—Barotseland, Basutoland, Malamulo, Maranatha, Solusi, and Somabula.

When the Porters arrived the membership numbered 902 and annual tithe receipts totalled almost \$12,000. The morale of the mission team was depressed due to indebtedness. The two major institutions, Plumstead Sanitarium and Claremont Union College, were struggling on borrowed money. Porter’s first step, after becoming acquainted with the conditions of the field, was to rally the mission team to conduct two evangelistic series, winning approximately 50 converts. Fresh faces in the pews buoyed spirits and the constituency

responded generously to an appeal to donate sacrificially in order to alleviate conference debt. At the 1913 General Conference session, Porter reported that during the quadrennium, 1908-1912, membership and tithe receipts in South Africa had doubled and the debts carried by the two major institutions had been halved.¹⁵

A third conference, Orange Free State, was added to the union as were four missions—Glendale, Emmanuel, Tsungwesi, and Zulu. Further, the Solusi and Barotseland Missions, located in modern-day Zimbabwe and Zambia respectively, had become self-supporting under their farming and industrial models of operation. Porter summed up his encouraging 1913 report by saying:

The clouds of discouragement overhanging the work on account of financial depression and other causes four years ago have been lifted by the kind hand of God, and today a loyal, consecrated, united and courageous band of workers stand ready to go anywhere, facing any danger, where they can serve the interests of the work the best.¹⁶

At the conclusion of the same General Conference session, Porter delivered the last evening sermon in the pavilion pitched in Washington, D.C. He highlighted the imputed righteousness of Christ, using verses from the letter to the Romans, chapter 3, as his principle passage.¹⁷

Asiatic Division President

At the same 1913 General Conference Porter was appointed president of the Asiatic Division Mission with headquarters in Shanghai, China. Once again, Hattie Porter did editorial work, issuing the *Asiatic Division Mission News* for the benefit of both the expatriates and nationals on the mission team.¹⁸ The administrative entity over which Porter now presided comprised of six sub-organizations: the China Union Mission, the India Mission (including Burma and Ceylon), the Japan Mission, the Korea Mission, the Philippine Mission, and the Singapore Mission.

He was called to leadership of the vast territory at a time when the challenge of administering an increasingly international church led to rapid transitions in the denomination's organizational structure. The term "mission" in the name of the division when Porter began his term meant that the General Conference had direct responsibility over it as a mission field. That changed at the Annual Council of 1915, when the General Conference Committee authorized organization of the Asiatic Division Conference. As a *conference*, it was the constituency of the division that was now to elect the leaders and to whom the leaders were responsible. The change in 1915 also involved a major territorial shift in which the Australasian Union Conference was added to the Asiatic Division, contributing more than 5,000 of the 8,217 members of the re-structured division.¹⁹

These momentous changes, amidst the stressful and disruptive circumstances of World War I, would be in play for the remainder of Porter's time as president of the division, but not much longer. In 1918 both the major changes of 1915 would be reversed: in the denominational structure, divisions would henceforth represent the

General Conference in their respective territories and no longer be conferences representing their constituencies. The Australasian Union would be detached from its brief connection with the Asiatic Division, and the latter, with some additional readjustments would become known as the Far Eastern Division by 1920.

Even before the end of his term, though, R.C. Porter's health again broke down. His duties required extensive travel, including journeys in tropical climates, where he contracted a disease that sapped his strength. He returned to the United States for a few months in 1916 and was advised by doctors to remain in the homeland. However, the urge to continue work in the Orient was so strong he felt compelled to sail for China again. His stay was brief because his willingness was greater than his capacity. He had to relinquish his work and return home once more.²⁰

Sadly, Porter declined in strength. He wanted to attend the 1918 General Conference session in April but finally yielded to the advice of physicians against making the trip.²¹ A few months later, and the age of 59, he passed away at his home in Hamilton, Missouri, on July 29, 1918, and was laid to rest in Highland Cemetery, Hamilton.²² His wife, Hattie, moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, where she passed away in November 1941 and was taken to Hamilton, Missouri, for interment beside her husband.²³

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NOTES

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3. Ibid.
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