

Coltheart, John Frederick (1924–1974)

MICHELLE DOWN

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John Frederick Coltheart was an innovative and successful evangelist in Australia and Europe.

Early Life (1924-1945)

John Frederick Coltheart was born on December 12, 1924 in Launceston, Tasmania, the eldest child of Frederick Reginald Coltheart (1893-1991) and Jessie

Elizabeth Joy Polden (1897-1976). Frederick's father was James Samuel Coltheart. James' mother, Ann Mcmillan, died in childbirth in 1862 and James was placed with the Williams family while his father, John Colthart (note spelling) left for New Zealand, never to return to Tasmania. James was brought up believing himself to be a Williams, but on discovering his actual lineage, changed his name to Coltheart on his marriage to Estelle Bloomfield.

John, also known as Jack, grew up with three siblings, Joy Winifred (Melville), Donald Thomas (1928-2015) and Daisy Elizabeth (Barendse, 1929-2017).¹ John was born with health problems and as a baby nearly died of pneumonia. This episode left him prone to chest infections.² When he was six years old his Methodist parents became Seventh-day Adventists, and John was baptized by Pastor George Burnside at the age of fourteen. He early showed his zeal for the Lord by bringing along a school friend who was baptized with him, his first convert.



John Coltheart, 1966.

Photo courtesy of the Coltheart family.

John wanted to become a metallurgical chemist, but his mother gently persuaded him to do the ministerial course at Avondale College instead. John had a brilliant and enquiring mind, and his energy was boundless. He was at the top of his class one year but was also active in running evangelistic meetings, studying, and working in the Sanitarium Health Food factory to pay his fees. He and David K. Down, who later became a missionary to India, held meetings and Bible studies and visited in the community every Sabbath afternoon.³

New Zealand Years (1946-1960)

After graduating in 1945⁴ John was asked to go to New Zealand.⁵ With typical haste he bought a ticket, sent a telegram to his parents telling them of his plans and boarded the steamer, sleeping on deck to save money. He worked with Alvin Cook in Whakatane, where together they established a small company of Seventh-day Adventists.⁶

Coltheart attended the wedding of Pastor Orm and Win Speck in Hamilton in 1946 and it was here he met Raye Loma Williams (1923-2012). They were married in 1948 by Pastor George Burnside in the Ponsonby Church and then helped Pastor Ephraim Giblett run an evangelistic series in Wanganui.⁷ The results were disappointing. It was discovered that the advertising leaflets were never handed out! Coltheart asked to run his own evangelistic program a few months later. Advertising with the slogan "Dead Men Do Tell Tales," he used biblical archaeology to demonstrate the truth of the Bible. The conference president was horrified that the topic was not on heaven, or some other biblical theme, but when the hall was filled to overflowing on the first night, he withdrew his objections. Coltheart knew the concept worked, and it became the signature topic of his evangelistic series for the rest of his life ⁸

A successful series in Dannevirke followed in 1949. Raye distributed handbills to the whole town and helped produce silk screen posters that she and John plastered onto billboards. She then became the usher for the night while John preached.

More meetings followed in Rotorua (1950), Petone (1951) and Masterton (1952-1953). John Coltheart was ordained at the North New Zealand camp meeting in 1952⁹ and went on a 16-week trip to the Middle East the following year. He had been embarrassed that he had never visited the places he was lecturing about and determined to fill the gaps in his knowledge.

The family moved often as John "didn't have the outlook of a residential-congregational minister, hovering over the faithful flock, but the pioneering spirit of the evangelist breaking new ground and winning new souls."¹⁰ He worked in Napier (1954), Hastings (1955) and Hamilton (1956) with successful programs in each city.

Wellington had always been a difficult city for Adventist evangelism, but Coltheart was not daunted. He rented the biggest theatre in town and with skillful advertising it was filled night after night. A report in the 1957 Australasian Record notes that 91 people were attending church as a result of the meetings.¹¹ An evangelistic

series in Auckland followed with thousands lining up to attend at the Regent Theatre on Queen Street.^{12 13} As if that wasn't enough to keep him busy, Coltheart enrolled at Auckland University where he completed two years of study in geology.¹⁴ He was fascinated with minerals and owned a valuable collection.

Australian Years (1961-1964)

In 1961, the Colthearts transferred to Sydney, with a program in the town hall, and then to Hobart in 1963. It was in Hobart that John pioneered the concept of holding all-day Sabbath seminars,¹⁵ which were very successful, and he continued to use them in future series. In an article John wrote for *Ministry*, he states "the seminar is very valuable in making sure people have faced the personal experience of conversion before we try to indoctrinate."¹⁶ The all-day seminar was not so much a meeting as a teaching style of evangelism, informal and relaxed, and an effective method for interacting more closely with people.

European Years (1965-1974)

Coltheart held a series of evangelistic programs in Adelaide in 1964 and was then invited to work in London in 1965¹⁷ where he ran meetings in the New Gallery on Regent Street, attracting 9,000 for the opening sessions. Two years later he was asked to be the ministerial secretary for the Northern European Division. This greatly expanded his sphere of influence as he traveled around Europe, running programs and holding minister's meetings.

As division evangelist, Coltheart ran programs in Stockholm (Sweden) and Bergen (Norway) in 1968. The meetings in Bergen were held in the former Gestapo headquarters building, still called the Gestapo House.¹⁸ More programs followed in Helsinki (Finland) in 1969, Rotterdam (Netherlands) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) in 1970 and in Arhus (Denmark) and Gothenberg (Sweden) in 1971.¹⁹ The following year saw him back in Helsinki and then to Oslo (Norway). He was in Edinburgh (Scotland) and Amsterdam (Netherlands) in 1973-1974.

Death

In October 1974, Coltheart contracted pneumonia and was admitted to Clare Hall hospital in Hertfordshire. He passed away on October 15 at the age of 49. An evangelistic series in Copenhagen was due to begin 5 days later and a minister from England hastily took his place. Another program planned for Munich in January 1975 had to be cancelled.

John and Raye Coltheart had three children, David John, Alvin George and Alison Merle Littleton. They were sometimes placed in boarding school when John traveled to Europe to conduct programs. Raye usually went with him as she knew the enormous pressure he was under and wanted to ensure he ate properly and looked after himself. She was the calming influence he needed, his most loyal supporter, and his able assistant. She

believed John burnt himself out with the frantic pace he lived, making him susceptible to infection. John Coltheart was buried in the Avondale SDA Cemetery in Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.

Contribution

John Coltheart's purpose was not just to demonstrate effective evangelism, but also to train the people working with him. "When he came to Europe he met with an army of pastor-evangelists loyally going into battle, not used to victory and almost expecting defeat. He galvanized their evangelistic spirit. He said, 'Where I am one, I want to raise a hundred evangelists.' Only Heaven knows how many souls he, together with his teams, have won, perhaps 2,000-3,000 as a direct result."²⁰

Coltheart was always looking for new ideas and methods. He proudly wrote of the electric map he developed to illustrate the worldwide spread of the Adventist church. He started an "evangelistic newspaper," to be given out at his programs.²¹ The all-day seminar was a unique concept that is now used regularly by the Church. He spiced his meetings by inviting local talent, such as the Samoan cornet player, Sauni Kuresa, to feature in his programs, or organized special events that were sure to give him publicity, such as the hunt for the "Oldest Bible."²²

John Coltheart wrote a number of books to be given out to people attending his programs and developed a "Sabbath Chart" illustrating the observance of the Sabbath through the centuries.

J. R. Spangler travelled with John on one occasion and wrote, "He eats, sleeps, and drinks evangelism! His heart must look like an evangelistic handbill. At places where we stayed together in the same room, we wondered at times if we would get any sleep. Our numerous walks through hill and dale were laced with ideas, suggestions, and discussions centering on the business of soul winning.... His scrupulous attention to even the smallest details connected with a campaign is an indication why the Lord has blessed his efforts."²³

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NOTES

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