

Morton, Eliza Happy (1852–1916)

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Eliza Morton, c. 1870s.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

Eliza Happy Morton was an Adventist author, educator, pedagogical reformer, poet, musician, musical composer, church administrator, and philanthropist. She is best remembered for her geography textbooks.

Early Life

Eliza was born on July 15, 1852, in Deering, Maine. She was the only daughter of William Morton (1820-1896) and Hannah Phenix-Morton (1826-1903).² Her parents became Adventists when she was a child, so she thought of herself as growing up in an Adventist home. Both William and Hannah were teachers who dedicated their lives to serving in rural schools. Eliza's parents were stalwart backers behind the fledgling Battle Creek College.³ Her parents eventually developed a nursery and greenhouse business. They were steadfast supporters of Ellen White, escorting her on visits to sites important to her childhood when her travel itinerary brought her to Maine.

Education and Career

Eliza Morton was educated at Westbrook Seminary in Portland, Maine (a site now occupied by the University of Maine).⁴ At age 16 she started teaching, serving for fifteen years in public schools mostly in and around Portland, Maine. During the late 1860s, she taught for one semester as the first Adventist school teacher in Battle Creek. Her term was the first of several attempts to open a school at the church's headquarters before

Goodloe Harper Bell⁵ successfully did so in 1872. Morton's attempt was short-lived because she was called back to her parents' home in Maine.⁶

In 1878 Morton reported on the Maine Conference camp meeting where she furnished "faithful reports" to "leading" state newspapers.⁷ In 1879 she became the secretary of a local chapter of the American Health and Temperance Association located near Portland, Maine.⁸ Her first piece of verse published in an Adventist publication was a poem, "The New Year," also published in 1879.⁹ In addition, she served as secretary of the Maine Sabbath School Association.¹⁰

As an educator Morton was an advocate for young children to give their hearts to Jesus. As early as age 6, or when you "can read and understand common conversation" is when one is "old enough to learn about God."¹¹ Children should also learn to sing. "Nearly every one can learn to sing . . . for children can cultivate an ear for music, even if they have not much natural talent for song."¹² Morton believed that children were impressionable, and during this formative period of life it was especially important to train young people to form right characters.

In 1880 Morton was called to take charge of the "Normal and Commercial Departments" at Battle Creek College. During the next three years, her ideas about teaching geography brought her favorable notice, and she published two series of *Potter Geographies*, as well as the *Morton Geographies* that made her famous. The success of these volumes caused quite a "stir among rival publishers" as the success of her textbooks "began to push out the old time books."¹³ Morton was an early member of the National Geographic Society. Morton "is absolute mistress of her pen, and her intimate knowledge of child nature enables her to say what she has to say in a way to appeal directly to the young student," making the study of geography "interesting from the first."¹⁴ Another popular book was titled *Geographical Spice*,¹⁵ a collection of "interesting and curious facts relating to the different countries of the world and their inhabitants."¹⁶ Her success in publishing brought her significant financial resources that she used for philanthropic purposes, especially for children.¹⁷ Of significant note was the International Sunshine Society, incorporated in 1900, that established schools for children.¹⁸

Morton was a poet, publishing hundreds of poems during her lifetime. Some have been set to music, notably "The Songs My Mother Used to Sing," which D. B. Towner, who traveled with Dwight L. Moody, was known to have used. Another popular song was titled "In the Cleft of the Rock." She contributed to James Edson White's *Temperance and Gospel Songs* (1880).¹⁹ She wrote at least eighteen hymns published in various hymnals.²⁰ Among Morton's own favorites were "My Mission," and "One Longs for Rest."²¹

From 1894 to 1911 Morton served as the business manager, as well as secretary and treasurer of the Maine Tract and Missionary Society.²² It was during this time that her parents passed away. After the death of her mother in 1903, Ellen White wrote a letter of comfort to Morton, praising her for her constant and loyal watch care of her mother. "I have a deep interest in you," urging her to write her back and to let her know about her

future plans.²³ During her tenure as an administrator, it was said that it was “safe to say that during these seventeen years no single individual contributed more to the upbuilding of the work in Maine than she did by her earnest labor, her influence, and her financial aid.”²⁴ She also served as conference education secretary around 1909 to 1912.²⁵ Altogether, she “made an outstanding contribution to the development of Adventist work in Maine.”²⁶

Later Life and Legacy

In January 1909 she fell on ice near her home which caused her great suffering. Her invalid state caused her to apply to the sustentation fund, but her request was denied due to the continued royalties on her books. In October 1914 she held a geographical exhibit for the Maine Teachers' Association Convention that took up a whole room in the city hall, which inspired many teachers about the possibilities for teaching geography. This exhibit was placed with the Maine Historical Society. She collected scrapbooks of nature and memorabilia, and was a member of the National Geographic Society. Poor health caused Eliza to go to Melrose (New England) Sanitarium where she underwent surgical treatment that proved incurable.²⁷ Eliza died on July 31, 1916, and is buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Portland, Maine.²⁸ She left all of her possessions in a trust to advance missionary work. Ultimately her “life was devoted to the work of giving the third angel’s message to the world.”²⁹ Morton left a significant legacy through her poetry, songs, and geography textbooks, making her one of the most well-known Adventist women authors by the time of her death. “Sister Morton wielded a facile pen,” noted the editors of the *Review* after her passing, “and the beautiful truths she has expressed in poetry and prose, as well as her godly life, have brought cheer to many hearts.”³⁰

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NOTES

1. H. C. Basney, "William Morton obituary," *ARH*, November 3, 1896, 15.
2. H. C. Basney, "Hannah E. Morton obituary," *ARH*, May 19, 1903, 23.
3. Note their pledges for \$25 (for William) and another \$20 for Hannah. See "College Pledges: Showing Who Have Paid and Have Not Paid," *Advent Review Supplement*, 1, attached to *ARH*, April 27, 1876.
4. John William Leonard, ed. *Woman's Who's who of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Women of the United States and Canada, 1914-1915* (New York: American Commonwealth Co., c1914), s.v. "Morton, Eliza Happy," 579.
5. See "Goodloe Harper Bell," ESDA, August 23, 2020, accessed August 4, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=98YL&highlight=goodloe|harper|bell>.
6. Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and Progress*, vol. 2, page 115.
7. "Maine Conference," *ARH*, September 19, 1878, 98.
8. See "The American Health and Temperance Association," *Good Health*, April 1879, 116-117.
9. Eliza H. Morton, "The New Year," *ARH*, January 2, 1879, 6.
10. "The Maine S. S. Association," *ARH*, October 16, 1879, 135; "Report of Maine S. S. Association," *Youth's Instructor*, December 3, 1879, 202.
11. Eliza H. Morton, "The Time to Obtain Religion," *Youth's Instructor*, December 17, 1879, 210.
12. Eliza H. Morton, "Children's Voices,--No. 3," *Youth's Instructor*, September 3, 1879, 142.

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14. "Volume Just Issued the Author of Which is Well-Known in Portland," *Evening Express*, August 17, 1900, 12.
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18. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Sunshine-Society> [accessed 8/1/23].
19. See announcement, *ARH*, January 4, 1881, 15.
20. https://hymnary.org/person/Morton_Eliza [accessed 7/29/23]
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22. Sustentation Fund Application, Eliza H. Morton, ca. 1913.
23. Ellen G. White to Eliza H. Morton, May 25, 1903, Letter 98, 1903, <https://egwwritings.org/read?panels=p14068.10602007&index=0> [accessed 7/31/23].
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25. "Maine Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1909), 21; "Maine Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1912), 16.
26. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* [1996], s.v. "Morton, Eliza H." 11:124.
27. See announcement in *The Lewiston Evening Sun-Journal*, June 27, 1916, 4.
28. "Eliza H. Morton," Find a Grave, 2023, accessed July 9, 2023, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/118774482/eliza-h-morton>.
29. See note, *Youth's Instructor*, September 5, 1916, 2.
30. See note, *ARH*, August 17, 1916, 24.

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