

Booklet

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**ON THE RIM OF A VOLCANO**  
**EARLY ADVENTISM ON LORD HOWE ISLAND**

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By Milton Hook



**Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series**



# **ON THE RIM OF A VOLCANO**

Early Adventism on Lord Howe Island

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Produced by the South Pacific Division Department of Education  
148 Fox Valley Road, Wahroonga, NSW 2076  
A Heritage Series: Debut - Adventism Down Under before 1885  
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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr Milton Hook is the author of "Flames Over Battle Creek", a brief history of the early days at the Review and Herald Publishing Association as seen through the eyes of George Amadon, printer's foreman at the institution. Dr Hook's doctoral dissertation researched the pioneering years of the Avondale School, 1894 to 1900, and he has published some of these findings.

He spent three years as a mission director in Papua New Guinea. His teaching years include primary, secondary and college level experience, especially in Bible subjects, in Australia, New Zealand and America. He is an ordained minister, married and the father of two sons.

He would welcome any information which may enhance the content of this series.



Lord Howe Island was discovered in 1788 when one of the first-fleeters, H.M.S. SUPPLY, was sailing from Sydney to Norfolk Island. Once its location was known it became a favourite spot for replenishing food supplies. Edible native greens, island turtles, native fowl, and reef fish were repeatedly raided by ships' crews.

The island itself is thought to be the rim remains of an ancient mid-ocean volcano now encrusted with broken-down coral. It has the appearance of an idyllic tropical island but has no oppressive heat, no malaria, and no snakes. The southern end is dominated by Mt. Gower and Mt. Lidgbird, uninhabited, and adorned with palms, pandanus and ferns. The two mountains are often enshrouded with cloud. The outer rim on the east is rocky and precipitous in places, but the western side of the island features an opal-coloured lagoon formed by the most southerly coral reef in the world.

Settlement first occurred in the 1830's when a handful of New Zealanders tried developing an industry in mutton-bird feathers. By the 1850's there were about fifteen folk ekeing out an existence and supplying whalers with vegetables and meat. Later, vast quantities of onions were exported to Sydney, and Kentia (or Howea) palms were shipped to Europe. The inhabitants were a hardy, self-reliant group of English, Australian and American settlers.

Adventism's first contact with Lord Howe Island was in September 1894. Pastor John Cole, stationed on Norfolk Island, was sailing to Sydney on the OSCAR ROBINSON to attend a conference and camp meeting at Ashfield when the schooner anchored offshore.

Unfavourable winds forced a stay of two weeks. In that time Cole became acquainted with some people on the island and held a few religious meetings. He, being an Irish American, naturally befriended Nathan Thompson, an American rigger on whaling ships who had settled on the island about 1856 for health reasons.

Cole capitalized on his contact with Thompson. At the Ashfield camp meeting in October/November 1894, Cole spoke in favour of sending a missionary to the island. The choice fell on Charles and Beatrice Baron. Their appointment as part self-supporting missionaries included the promise of \$1 per week salary. They were the first Australian missionaries to be appointed to the Pacific Island field. He was a practical man and had also done some canvassing, but neither of them were trained in teaching, nursing or ministry. Booking passage on the BURKSGATE, they left Sydney with baby Harold on December 10. They were accompanied by Stephen and Melvina Belden, American missionaries bound for Norfolk Island, as well as Cole returning with them.

The Barons disembarked at Lord Howe Island on December 12 and were introduced to some locals by Cole before he continued with the boat. After an initial rebuff in trying to obtain lodgings, Thompson came to their rescue with the offer of two rooms in a house he owned until they could arrange something permanent. A few days later Thompson offered Baron a small piece of his land in the southern half of the island for five years or less. The token rental was ten cents per year. Thompson also gave fencing wire to enclose the property.

Baron wrote to church headquarters in Australia estimating the cost of building a two-roomed home with iron roof to catch drinking water would be about \$140. This included shipping charges for materials from Sydney. He built such a home, later adding a kitchen and making his own furniture.

On the second Sunday after their arrival, December 23, 1894, the Barons started an afternoon Sunday school with nine children. They



also explored other ways of being helpful in the community. Assuming the role of school-teacher seemed to be the most practical at the time. The public school-mistress, Mrs. Cavage, had closed her school because inter-family squabbles had led some parents to withdraw their children. This had lowered the number of pupils to below the minimum requirements. In the meantime the school house had blown down in a gale.

Baron offered to resurrect the school. With permission from Cavage he re-erected the building in 1895 and taught the 3 R's for three hours on Monday to Friday mornings. There were up to sixteen students. No fee was charged, but parents gave surplus eggs, fish, fruit and vegetables which supplemented Baron's own garden. In this way they endeavoured to exert a Christian influence in a practical way.

These missionaries returned to Australia in mid - 1897. Years later Baron said, "We did not see any direct results for our labour on Lord Howe [Island] but we were permitted to sow the seed, and in later years some of the children and adults took hold fully, and rejoiced in the truth".

Except for church magazines sent to the island, nothing more was done for almost fifteen years despite church leaders occasionally asking the homeland membership for volunteer missionaries.

A fresh spark was lit in 1911. Mrs. Nichols, a resident of Lord Howe Island, visited Norfolk Island and came in contact with Arthur Ferris, the Adventist missionary at the time. He had some Bible studies with her which left a good impression. On her return home she wrote to Ferris inviting him to visit Lord Howe Island and conduct some religious meetings. Ferris arrived on the island the week before Christmas 1911. Most of the ninety inhabitants attended his public meetings over the Christmas/New Year period. He returned to Norfolk in the first week of the New Year, just long enough to organize a few home matters, and then he returned to complete his series. Sickness overtook him and he scurried home to Norfolk,

claiming seven people had decided to become Adventists, including Mrs Nichols.

Cecil and Ethel Meyers came to nurture the interest and develop Bible studies when Ferris left. Almost a third of the residents attended his Sabbath services regularly. However, for some reason Meyers did not make the same impression as Ferris. Some residents grew antagonistic and most developing interests cooled, including Mrs Nichols. Meyers left after only about six months on the island.

Pastor Edwin Butz replaced Meyers about September 1912. Butz was appointed with the express purpose of reviving the interest, baptising converts and organizing them into a church group. The first baptism took place on February 27, 1913, towards the south end of the island near Johnson's Beach where Soldier Creek runs into the lagoon. Three married women were baptised - Sarah Johnson, Ellen Fenton, and Rosario Austic.

Sarah Johnson had been born Sarah Rachel Mitchell in the Cape of Good Hope Colony, of South African black parentage. Orphaned when five years old, she was adopted and raised in Hong Kong. Educated, and working as a governess and house nurse, she transferred to Sydney in mid-life and there met an American black, Perry Johnson, who had been born a slave. He was a fisherman at the time, working the reefs near Lord Howe Island. Perry was about ten years younger than Sarah. They married and spent the remainder of their lives on Nathan Thompson's property at the foot of Mt. Lidgbird.

The Johnsons lived in a primitive palm-thatch cottage with a stone fire-place at one end. Perry worked as Thompson's farm labourer. Sarah tended Thompson's cattle and helped as a domestic in Thompson's home. They would no doubt have heard the Bible studies by Cole and Baron, more than two decades earlier, but not until Ferris came did Sarah decide to be a Seventh-day Adventist.

Her eyesight had failed totally by that time but she was very faithful in attending the meetings.

When Sarah Johnson, affectionately known to all as "Auntie Johnson", requested baptism, Butz apparently checked her marital papers as a matter of routine, only to discover that her long-time marriage was invalid. Butz therefore conducted a legal service for Sarah and Perry in their humble cottage on February 12, 1913. The marriage of this ninety-five-year-old blind woman followed by her baptism as a Seventh-day Adventist was unprecedented and, of course, something of a record difficult to better. Her husband died two years later, but she outlived him, finally passing away in 1918 when over one hundred years old.

The other two women baptised, both in their early forties, were Ellen Fenton and Rosario Austic. It was Ellen Fenton who later gave a small plot of land to the Ferrises, enabling them to build a little cottage of their own on the island. Rosario Austic, known as "Rose" or 'Auntie Rose', was a daughter of Nathan Thompson. No doubt she also had heard the Advent message preached much earlier by Cole and Baron. On the Sunday following the first baptism, Mrs. Janet King was also baptised. Her baptism had been delayed a week because her husband had initially threatened physical violence if she went ahead with the ceremony.

In March 1913 Butz made a tour of six weeks to Vanuatu, arriving back at Lord Howe Island on April 21. His successor had not arrived from Australia so he decided to stay longer. On Sunday, May 11, he conducted a third baptism. On this occasion two married men and three married women became members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They were Rose Austic's husband, "Ted"; Herbert Wilson and his wife, Harriet; Wilson's sister, Mabel Payten, and his sister-in-law, Ada Wilson.

On the same Sunday, May 11, Butz organized the nine believers into a church, promising that his successor would be ordained as their church elder before leaving Australia. The group continued to

meet for their services in the school. Their Sabbath School membership numbered twenty-four.

Back in Australia, John and Harriet Robinson were preparing to sail as self-supporting missionaries to Lord Howe Island. They had become Adventists about five years beforehand in Victoria. On the Sabbath when the newly-completed Wahroonga church was opened, July 12, 1913, John was ordained as the elder of the Lord Howe Island church before he embarked on mission service. He was then sixty-two years of age. Harriet was forty-eight.

The Robinsons arrived at Lord Howe Island in August 1913. They visited every home on the island, giving out literature and making friends. A third of the inhabitants were already attending Adventist services. This fact alarmed those of the traditional Anglican church, so much so that in February 1914 a minister was sent to the island with the aim of banishing the Adventists. Unfortunately, this only bred ill-feeling in the Christian community. The Robinsons found it difficult to evangelize in that kind of atmosphere but they did begin a Dorcas Society and made clothes for the Vanuatu Mission. They returned to Australia in 1915.

Arthur Ferris, still stationed on Norfolk Island, made two ministerial visits to Lord Howe Island in 1915 to maintain mission momentum but the members were without real leadership for a period of about eighteen months, in mid-1917 Pastor Cole, then President of the New South Wales Conference, visited both Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. While on Norfolk he ordained Sidney Nobbs as elder of the Lord Howe Island church. Sidney and his wife, Ceilia, sailed to Lord Howe Island in August 1917. Their three-year term of service was much appreciated.

It was during Nobbs' leadership that the first Adventist church structure was built on Lord Howe Island. Nobbs and other church members first gathered building materials. They felled some hardwood and reduced it in a pitsaw. Timber from local banyan trees was used for the interior lining boards. One church member donated

West Australian jarrah floorboards. Other members gave funds to buy timber from Norfolk Island. The long roof span was cut from an Oregon log which floated ashore providentially, and a cedar log, wedged for years in the rocks, was retrieved and fashioned into a rostrum.

Arthur and Jessie Ferris transferred to Lord Howe Island from Norfolk Island on February 1, 1920. Ferris and Nobbs immediately applied to the committee in charge of island affairs to secure one-half of the property zoned for church purposes. (The adjoining half was secured by the Church of England). It was situated in the centre of the island. Permission was granted and the following day the church members held a prayerful open-air service as foundations were laid.

Building proceeded for three months and when it was almost completed an enormous sale-of-work was held in it to raise funds for an organ. Needlework, knitted ware, furniture of island timber, cakes, preserves, jellies, island-grown peanuts and popcorn all sold quickly to realize over \$100 for the organ and shipping costs. Ferris, a little later, bought an Estey organ in Sydney for \$80 and despatched it to the island. Just prior to sailing for Sydney, Ferris dedicated the trim little church on April 21, 1920.

Nobbs returned to his home on Norfolk Island soon after the Lord Howe Island church was dedicated and Ferris replaced him, beginning a fifteen-year term of mission service on the island. Fifteen people were baptised in those fifteen years, the membership growing from seventeen in 1921 to twenty-nine in 1934.

In 1924 Ferris introduced the annual collection for missions. Their aim that maiden year was \$10. The children did the lion's share of the soliciting. Lily King canvassed the tourists and collected over \$6. Five-year-old Muriel Ferris canvassed alone and had sixty cents by the end of the campaign. Little Roland Payten, just three years old, collected a donation from his uncle and then ran home crying because his uncle kept the magazine. His mother gave him another

magazine to calm him and unbeknown to her he trotted off to his uncle again for more money. A total of \$11 was collected altogether by the church members and children.

Ferris also instituted an annual camp meeting, the first being held in April 1932 on Jack and Gladys Shick's farm at the foot of Mt. Lidgbird. Pastor Hare was the guest speaker at the second camp meeting, a week-long programme in April 1933. These were, of course, not large gatherings. Hare reported there were sometimes fifty listeners in the main twelve-metre circular tent. Three small family tents made up the remainder of the pitched canvas.

Arthur and Jessie Ferris finished their long term of service on the island at the end of 1934. He often said, "There is only one thing harder than leaving home and going to the islands, and that is leaving the islands and coming home again".

Pastor Griffith Jones and his wife, Marion, replaced the Ferdses until 1938. Then, at the beginning of 1939, Ralph and Ruby Farrar began fourteen years of mission work on the island. They were 1932 graduates of the Sydney Sanitarium and therefore especially welcome because of their medical experience.

During the Farrar era the island residents were trying to generate an export industry in vegetable and flower seeds. Having had some bee-keeping experience in New Zealand, Farrar supervised the introduction of bees for pollination. Not only was this a boon for seed production, but in a short space of time honey was naturally in plentiful supply.

Farrar also rebuilt the mission home. This was the one Ferris had constructed on Fenton's property in the southern end of the island. Throughout the World War Two years membership remained steady at twenty-six. Sabbath School membership numbered about thirty-six, representing approximately a third of the island population.

After the war the island mission was incorporated into the North New South Wales Conference and a succession of church pastors each remained for only three years or less. Construction work began on an attractive new church and adjoining house in 1958. It was the first cement structure to be built on the island and was officially opened by Pastor Naden on February 25, 1960. The church is now included in the Greater Sydney Conference.

Tourism is the most flourishing industry because the island remains a haven for those seeking sun and solitude. The tiny Adventist church membership maintains a friendly witness to resident and tourist alike.

*Major sources for this booklet are the "Bible Echo and Signs of the Times", the "Australasian Record", the Lord Howe Island Church Membership Record Book, office records of the District Registrar on Lord Howe Island, and the author's personal collection of pioneer data.*

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