

Rev. Frank Ernest Paice 1888-1964

Frank E. Paice was a prominent and respected citizen in Melbourne, Australia, for three decades, having been, among other things, a suburban councillor and mayor, a justice of the peace, a commissioner of the Metropolitan Board of Works, and an executive in Hume Engineering Limited. But hardly anyone knew that he had been an ordained clergyman and Baptist missionary in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) from 1912-1918. He also kept secret the fact that he had been in a tragic marriage to Florence M. "Florrie" Cox and that fellow-missionary A. Olga Johnston was his second wife, with whom he'd had an affair while still a married missionary.



Cllr Frank and Mrs Olga Paice, Nunawading Mayoral Ball, Box Hill Town Hall, Melbourne, 1952

Frank Paice was born into a religious family—in Woolston, a suburb of Christchurch, New Zealand. His parents, William George “Willie” and Jane “Jenny” Paice, both born in England, had their first child in Australia, Edith, at South Melbourne in 1878. They then spent at least the next eight years in New Zealand, where they had a second daughter, Eva, followed by George and finally Frank.

It has not been possible to establish when, or why, the family returned to Australia, but Frank was brought up near Melbourne at One Tree Hill in the Dandenongs, where Willie had a market garden and was a lay preacher in the Baptist Church.

Frank grew into a very handsome young man with a natural, commanding presence. Though he was a man of firm and clear views, he was mostly well liked, finding it easy to mix with a variety of friends and associates. He was a skilled carpenter but initially trained to become an engineer. He never completed his engineering studies after both he and his elder brother George got “God’s call” and chose to become clergymen, doing their training together at the Baptist College of Victoria in Melbourne.

A formal photograph published in *The Southern Baptist* in June 1911 shows the students and lecturers lined up at the college with Frank and George standing alongside each other. One of the lecturers in that photograph was my great uncle, the Rev. Hedley J. Sutton, who was in Melbourne on an extended furlough (leave) from his missionary responsibilities in East Bengal.



By courtesy "Punch."

LECTURERS AND STUDENTS, BAPTIST COLLEGE OF VICTORIA. SESSION 1911.

Top Row.—R. Thorne, P. Goodman, E. Holloway, W. Wingfield, A. Hannah, J. Newnham, A. Muriel, A. Parker, S. Goble.
 Second Top Row.—A. Driver, T. Kelly, C. Urquhart, F. Paice, G. Paice, S. Bunn, R. Stowards, S. M'Donald.
 Second Front Row.—S. Dorman, J. Howlett-Ross, Rev. F. C. Spurr, Rev. W. H. Holdsworth, M.A. (president), Miss Sims, B.A.,
 Rev. Hedley Sutton, M.A., Rev. E. Harris.
 Front Row.—C. Harris, H. Childs, W. Phillips, J. M'Cue, E. Fisher.

It can be assumed that it was Hedley who inspired Frank to join him on the mission field. Frank also felt attracted to India because his grandfather, George T. Paice, had fought in the Second Sikh War of 1848-49 which had resulted in the Punjab being annexed by Britain. While Frank's brother, George W. Paice, took up the first of several postings to churches in Victoria, Frank underwent extra training to prepare him for his work in East Bengal. It was apparently during this time that he began courting Florrie Cox. They almost certainly met through being members of the congregation at the Auburn Baptist Church, which was a religious and informal social hub in Melbourne for the Cox, Sutton and Paice families.

It is difficult to know what drew Frank and Florrie together. Frank wanted to marry and have children, but to what extent this desire was matched by Florrie cannot be established. Whatever Florrie's attitude, she would have been under family and social pressures to marry and produce children. Frank would not have had a wide choice of potential wives as few women would have been sufficiently religious and hardy enough to accept the many challenges of a missionary wife.

It is not known if Frank had any serious girlfriends before he became engaged to Florrie, but I stumbled across an intriguing entry in an illustrated autograph book that my mother inherited from her aunt Maude Irene "Rena" Sutton, one of Hedley Sutton's younger sisters.

Rena died in March 1911, from tuberculosis, aged just 22. Frank's entry, like most of the others, had a religious and formal tone. But it did show that he knew Rena back in February 1910, the year before he began studying for the ministry and more than two years before he became engaged to Florrie.

It is not now possible to establish whether there was any special significance to this entry, but my mother thought that there could well have been. She said that single men did not routinely make entries in an unmarried girl's autograph book unless they were family or close friends. It is entirely possible, therefore, that Frank had seen Rena as a potential marriage partner.

We will never know for certain about Frank's intentions towards Rena, but it is clear that she would have been sufficiently religious to qualify as a missionary wife. I have in my possession an Active Member's Pledge Card signed by Rena as a member of the evangelical group, Junior Society of Christian Endeavour, when she was a teenager. In addition to the usual daily prayers, she promised to read the bible each day and carry out other regular religious duties.

Hedley Sutton, an elder brother, would have been delighted to have a member of his own family alongside him in East Bengal “serving God by gathering souls”, as it was often put. But it was not to be. The speculation about Frank and Rena aside, it is ironical, in view of what happened later to Frank, that his contribution to Rena’s autograph book should include this quotation from the former British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli: “Circumstances are beyond the control of men, but his conduct is within his own power.”

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Paperback, Kindle and eBook copies of *God's Triangle* can be bought [HERE](#).
Reviews are [HERE](#).

More about **Florence M. "Florrie" Cox** is [HERE](#).
More about **A. Olga Johnston** is [HERE](#)

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