

Ellen White and Reformation Historians

by Eric Anderson

She often copies, without credit or sign of quotation, whole sentences and even paragraphs, almost word for word, from other authors,” charged Dudley M. Canright in 1887. Just commencing his melancholy career as Seventh-day Adventism’s great heresiarch, Canright had very specific complaints about Ellen G. White’s use of historical sources. “Compare ‘Great Controversy,’ page 96, with ‘History of the Reformation,’ by D’Aubigné, page 41,” he urged his readers. “This she does page after page. Was D’Aubigné also inspired?”

Over the years defenders of the faith have responded to Canright and other critics by assuring church members that Mrs. White’s “literary borrowings” were “limited,” and that she only used historians to supplement and support what she had already seen in vision. Francis D. Nichol, author of the comprehensive apologetic work *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, noted that “only 12 percent” of the 1911 edition of *Great Controversy* was directly quoted material, and the bulk of this was simply “the words of some notable person in history, such as Luther or

some martyr.” Arthur L. White, the prophet’s grandson, explained her use of historians in this way:

Just as her study of the Bible helped her to locate and describe the many figurative representations given to her regarding the development of the controversy, so the reading of histories of the reformation helped her to locate and describe many of the events and the movements presented to her in vision.

Recent research by historian Donald R. McAdams, president of Southwestern Adventist College, shows the problem to be “far more complex” than either critics or defenders had recognized. In the light of McAdams’ work, the old answers to objections are now totally inadequate.

After extremely thorough investigation, McAdams has come to a conclusion which may startle some Adventists, though many scholars have long held similar views privately. “The historical portions of *Great Controversy* that I have examined are selective abridgments and adaptations of historians,” writes McAdams in a 250-page document entitled, “Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians.” “Ellen White was not just borrowing paragraphs here and there that she ran across in her reading, but in fact following the historians page after page, leaving out

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much material, but using their sequence, some of their ideas and often their words." He adds, in a highly significant sentence, "In the samples I have examined I have found no historical fact in her text that is not in their text." Mrs. White relied upon her historical sources "not only for descriptions of events," but also, in many cases, "for the ordering of events and the significance attached to them." In the light of this heavy dependence, it is not surprising that Mrs. White repeated some of the historical errors of her sources. As McAdams cautiously puts it, "[Mrs. White], at times, described events inaccurately."

For all its revisionism, McAdams' work is not an attack on the "spirit of prophecy" or denominational leadership. Far from being heresy, McAdams' views are likely to become the new orthodoxy. "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians" is a cautiously written document which deliberately avoids the icon-busting gusto that some readers saw in Ronald L. Numbers' *Prophetess of Health*, though both works portray an Ellen White heavily influenced by her environment. Its author has been careful, at every step of his research, to cooperate with the Ellen G. White Estate trustees and other "brethren of experience."

McAdams' study of Ellen White's historical sources began more than six years ago when he was a history professor at Andrews University. Asked to lead a discussion on a book of his choice for a Sabbath-afternoon book club, he thought of a volume he had recently read, *The English Reformation* by the distinguished modern historian A. G. Dickens. "It occurred to me," says McAdams, "that the students might enjoy reading this book along with the chapter in *Great Controversy* on the English Reformation." McAdams had been struck by the fact that "Dickens, like Ellen White, saw the English Reformation as essentially a spiritual movement" having nothing to do with Henry VIII's concupiscence, and he hoped "that I might discover that Ellen White had anticipated modern historians." But careful study revealed something entirely different — Ellen White's extensive use of nineteenth-century historian J. H. Merle d'Aubigné.

Fascinated, yet troubled by this subject, McAdams first prepared a short paper, for private circulation, entitled "Ellen G. White and the English Reformation," and then resolved, in order "to strengthen my conclusion," to study another part of *Great Controversy*, as well as to review Ellen White's personal explanations of her historical work.

He found further strong evidence that Ellen White employed nineteenth-century Protestant historians, rather than visions, to fill in a great deal of historical detail. He also found a reassuring explanation for Mrs. White's use of the historians in her own statements. Particularly important, he felt, was the introduction to *Great Controversy*, with its often-overlooked statement of purpose: "It is not so much the object of this book to present new truths concerning the struggles of former times, as to bring out facts and principles which have a bearing on coming events." Ellen White made little effort to hide her reliance on Protestant historians:

The great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world; they are facts which none can gainsay. This history I have presented briefly, in accordance with the scope of this book. . . . In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject.

The second section of *Great Controversy* which McAdams examined was a portion of chapter six, dealing with the life and martyrdom of the Bohemian reformer John Huss. With infinite patience, McAdams prepared 73 pages of parallel columns, placing Ellen White's work on one side and on the other her source, James A. Wylie's *History of the*

Reformation (1874–77), a militantly anti-Catholic source. All of the details of the historical record — names, events, dates, quotations — came from Wylie, and almost always in the same sequence. Most of the time, *Great Controversy* did not follow Wylie’s words exactly, but simply paraphrased closely. A number of historical inaccuracies in Wylie’s text found their way into *Great Controversy*, McAdams discovered. Wylie and White attribute to the pope an ineffective interdict issued by the archbishop of Prague, and they describe the interdict as a fearful calamity, although, in fact, the king simply forbade its observance. Huss’s chapel, rather than the University of Prague, is erroneously presented as the center of the reform movement. Following Wylie, Mrs. White has Huss withdrawing to his native village at a time when he was actually in Prague, and, later, preaching with zeal and courage when, in fact, he was in exile, visiting his parish only in secret. The beginning of Huss’s friendship with Jerome is misdated by more than a decade. *Great Controversy* mistakenly assumes

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that Huss disagreed with basic Catholic doctrines, rather than merely attacking corrupt practices in the church.

McAdams described his research in a second paper — a shorter version, basically, of the present manuscript “Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians” — and in February 1973 mailed copies to about a dozen Adventist leaders, including Richard Hammill, Willis Hackett, Arthur White, Mervyn Maxwell, and Molleurus Couperus (SPECTRUM’s founding editor) asking for “criticisms, suggestions and advice.” “I have chosen not to seek publication at this time,” McAdams wrote to these men of influence, “because I recognize that many people are

not prepared for the evidence I present.” The off-the-record reactions he received indicated that his evaluation of Ellen White’s historical work was a realistic one, acceptable to responsible church leaders.

During the next summer, McAdams made a remarkable discovery, indeed a providential discovery, as he sees it, which added a new dimension to his research. While working on another denominational history project at the White Estate in Washington, D.C., he learned that portions of Ellen White’s rough draft for the 1888 edition of *Great Controversy* were still in existence. According to McAdams, none of these manuscripts had ever been “transcribed into typescript or even read except for an isolated page here and there.” The most important fragment was 64 pages long, and it was the draft for the very section McAdams had been examining — the half-chapter on Huss.

With this new information, McAdams was now able to compare Mrs. White’s historical sources with both her rough draft and the final printed version of *Great Controversy*. The newly discovered fragment provided overwhelming evidence (though the point was already established) that Mrs. White was heavily dependent upon Wylie. If McAdams’ research had dealt with any other writer, he could have proved his thesis with a few dozen pages of comparison, but since it was Ellen White’s way of working which was at issue, he felt impelled to move very cautiously, proving and reproving each of his contentions. Using a triple-column format, he incorporated Mrs. White’s rough draft into his previous research, charting the development of the Huss narrative across 186 typed pages. Most readers will find this mass of material tedious going, but few are likely to challenge the thoroughness of McAdams’ work.

Mrs. White’s rough draft was written under the pressure of a deadline, and it is filled with misspellings and poor grammar. She speaks of the “Yoak” of Christ, His model “charicter,” calling Him the “Captan of my Salvation.” Adequate punctuation is often missing and singular verbs frequently clash with plural nouns. The messiness of this manuscript has made the White Estate unwilling to allow widespread circulation of

McAdams' manuscript. The document has been available, under careful restrictions, for a few months at Adventist college libraries in North America, but "the transcript of the rough draft may NOT be copied in any form," according to a form letter sent to chairmen of religion and history departments. Explains the White Estate's Ronald Graybill, author of the letter: "This material was not intended for publication in its rough-draft form, and because of the mechanical imperfections of the document, it raises questions about Mrs. White's style and method of writing which ought to be answered in the context of all the material on *that* subject."

Much more important than the good form of Mrs. White's rough draft is the question of the changes made by her literary assistants. About half the rough draft is entirely Mrs. White's own work, with no debts to James Wylie or other historians. These portions of the manuscript deal with the cosmic significance of earthly history, quite literally the great controversy between Christ and Satan. There is, for example, an extended comparison of the deaths of Huss and Christ. None of this material was included in the final draft of *Great Controversy*. In short, McAdams found that "the only completely original part of the manuscript was all cut out and in fact has never appeared in print anywhere."

Most of the remainder of the rough draft is simply copied from Wylie, in many cases word for word. In two instances Mrs. White notes the specific page from which she is working. "Insert page 148 paragraph on second column," she notes parenthetically at one point. Mrs. White's contribution was to abridge Wylie's material, reducing 33 pages of Wylie to 14 pages in *Great Controversy*.

The rough draft was later polished considerably, probably by Marion Davis, Mrs. White's literary assistant, so that the final version of the Huss story appeared in graceful paraphrase of Wylie, rather than simple,

direct borrowing. A few new paragraphs from Wylie which had not been used in the rough draft appeared in the printed version, added apparently by Miss Davis in the late stages of editing.

McAdams' work shows beyond cavil that Wylie was the source for the historical details in the Huss narrative. It is also reasonable to believe, as McAdams does, "that not all of the historical events described in *Great Controversy* were first seen in vision by Ellen White." Certainly, nearly all Seventh-day Adventist historians are comfortable with McAdams' interpretation. McAdams presented his research to a session of the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians in Dallas in December 1977, and his conclusions were thoroughly discussed at the 1978 meeting of the Association of Western Adventist Historians. Not one of his peers criticized McAdams' thoroughness or challenged his thesis.

McAdams insists that his work will not disturb any reader who has a sound understanding of Mrs. White's role in the church. Far from undermining faith, his examination of the sources of *The Great Controversy* should contribute to a mature and secure confidence in the prophetic gift. "We must read [*Great Controversy*]," McAdams says, "according to the purpose for which it was written and not damage its effectiveness by making claims for it that can only result in destroying the faith of many who might otherwise respond to its message." For all its borrowing, the book far transcends the derivative. "With its over-all purpose and its powerful concluding chapters to give meaning to the history, *Great Controversy* cries out to our spirit like no work of history."

The McAdams paper raises important questions which deserve further investigation, particularly the matter of how Ellen White's manuscripts were edited. No further research is necessary, however, to demonstrate that *Great Controversy* should not be taken as an independent or infallible historical source.