

White on White: A Confirming Biography

Arthur L. White. *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900–1905* and *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmshaven Years, 1905–1915* (Volumes 5 and 6 of the author's projected 6-volume biography.) Vol. 5: 448 pp., Vol. 6: 472 pp., illus., bibl., index. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981, 1982. \$16.95 each.

reviewed by Frederick G. Hoyt

“If Ellen White becomes better known as an individual . . . as well as the messenger of the Lord,” Arthur L. White writes in the final sentence to the foreword of *The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900–1905* (volume five of his planned six-volume biography of Ellen G. White), “the objectives of the author will have been largely met” (V: 12). That is certainly a reasonable desire, but every reader of this and subsequent volumes, in this long-awaited biography of the author's grandmother should study the entire foreword carefully before reading a word of the text. The author's polite request in the title of the foreword (“An Explanation the Author Would Like to Have You Read”) should have been phrased more forcefully. In fairness to both the author and to himself, it is mandatory that any reader carefully study this introductory section.

Arthur White has aimed, with this massive biography, “to portray accurately the life and work of Ellen White as the Lord's messenger in the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” to “illustrate her prophetic mission,” to emphasize constantly “the major

role the visions played,” and “to present in the narrative, in a natural way, confidence-confirming features” (V: 9–11). Consequently, the reader must not make comparisons with doctoral dissertations or scholarly monographs. It is literature to nurture the faith of believers and not a contribution to scholarly debate. No new thesis is presented by Arthur White, but old convictions receive further confirmation, illustration, and elaboration. The author does not propose to initiate debate with scholars or critics, or to deal extensively with hostile sources. Arthur White's fundamental objective is that the reader share with him “a confidence-confirming experience.”

Using incidents from Ellen White's 1910 return voyage from Australia to America, Arthur White portrays Ellen “as a very human person” who could be both satisfied and annoyed (V: 10). She seemed “pleased with her room” (V: 16), and she was “a good sailor” (V: 17), but during the first Sabbath at sea she was disturbed by noise from the deck above her stateroom where passengers were “pitching quoits” (V: 17). At Auckland, sleep was impossible because of the “constant, thunderous roar” as the ship's coal bunkers were filled (V: 18); she continued to be bothered by quoit playing on the deck above her bridal suite and “at night, when everyone should be sleeping, there was dancing on deck over her head till the wee hours of the morning” (V: 23). Smoking especially irked her. Several times she asked men smoking near her to refrain, but they rudely told her that “she could go ‘somewhere else.’” An officer to whom she finally appealed stated that he was helpless (V: 23).

Her major complaint aboard ship con-

cerned her anxiety over anticipated celebrations: "As they neared the California arrival time, late Thursday night, Ellen White felt she could hardly endure the expected partying that traditionally marks the final day of a voyage" (V: 23). Both she and her son, Willie, prayed for a storm. Their prayers were abundantly answered when the sea became so rough that the party was cancelled, but she had to remain in her berth, too sick "to turn over" (V: 25).

Arthur White balances these brief glimpses of an "ordinarily human" Ellen with his efforts "to keep constantly before the reader the major role the visions (of Ellen White) played in almost every phase of the experiences comprising the narrative" (V: 11). Although references to Ellen White's visions are widely scattered throughout the two volumes rather than gathered into a single chapter, most readers will recognize the critical importance of this topic. Had God not communicated with her on a regular basis from her first vision in South Portland, Maine, in December 1844, through the years down to her last vision at Elmshaven on the morning of March 3, 1915, she would today be little more than a census statistic, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church would doubtless never have come into existence. The varied details concerning these visions, quite apart from their content, make for fascinating reading.

Ellen White apparently experienced several visions during her return from Australia. Direct quotations from her "instructor" during these visions indicate clearly that the speaker was Christ (V: 22). In her last vision during the voyage, she explained later in a letter to an unidentified person, "The Lord revealed Himself to me . . . and comforted me, assuring me that He had a refuge prepared for me, where I would have quiet and rest." She had fallen asleep in "a little anteroom" while filled with dread concerning "the next day's carousal," when she "was awakened by a voice speaking to her. As she gained her senses, she knew what it meant. 'The room was filled with a sweet

fragrance, as of beautiful flowers.' Then she fell asleep once more and was awakened in the same way" (V: 23-25).

For many years Mrs. White experienced frequent visions, but during her last years they became rare, usually appearing as "visions of the night" or dreams given in private. However, Arthur White mentions that a public standing vision occurred in Los Angeles during a church service on March 9, 1901, 14 years before her death (V: 57-58). A very special type of vision occurred several times during this period—but Ellen White declares that in previous years she had experienced this "a hundred times or more" (V: 53)—in which an unusual soft light (sometimes described as azure) filled the room or circled around in it, together with a sweet fragrance and beautiful music. These special occasions apparently were when Christ himself appeared to her without using the usual angel intermediaries. Thus, on one such occasion, "a Voice" spoke to her, declaring, "I am your Saviour (VI: 123-24; see also V: 23-24, 53-54).

Chapter one of volume five picks up the thread of Ellen G. White's long and complex life in 1900, and introduces us to William Clarence White, her son, clearly a very important figure in the period of SDA history covered by these two volumes, second only to his mother. But the reader must quickly comprehend that the author identifies him in a variety of ways and without any explanation of his varied roles: as just Willie or William; as W. C. White, Willie White, William C. White, or William White; or just W.C. or WCW. More unfortunately, Willie is a tantalizingly elusive figure in these pages. He appears in the book and was almost always present when critical denominational decisions had to be made, but Arthur White usually fails to define his specific roles and does not identify his official or *de facto* position. Neither is his relationship to his mother adequately delineated.

The complex relationship of Ellen White's two surviving sons, James Edson

(the elder by five years) and William Clarence, to each other and to their mother, and she to them, is an intriguing subject. What must have been longstanding sibling rivalry, and the elder son's profound distress at being supplanted by his younger brother, surface dramatically in 1906 when word reached Elmhaven that Edson in Battle Creek was declaring that Willie "manipulated" his mother's writings. The result was a six-page letter to Edson from his mother (which Arthur White characterizes as one of "cutting reproof and censure"). These longstanding difficulties, which Mrs. White called "the grief of my life," were finally resolved only when she reluctantly revealed that Christ himself had given her specific instructions on how to handle the situation, with Willie designated "My counselor" and Edson rejected (VI: 100–102, 355–57). In his discussion of this rivalry, Arthur White sides with W. C., his father, and subtly isolates Edson, using no nicknames for him (as he does for Willie) and never referring to him as "Elder," although I presume that both brothers were ordained.

Perhaps the third most important person in these volumes is John Harvey Kellogg. Index references to him are more extensive than for any person except Mrs. White. His dominant role justifies the extensive treatment given him by Arthur White, although some may feel that he unjustifiably has been made the *bete noire* of the story. It is simply incomprehensible that Richard Schwarz's excellent, scholarly, book-length study, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.* (based on his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Michigan and printed by Southern Publishing Association in 1970) is not among the sources used for these sections.

Arthur White relates several captivating stories in his biography, but chapter 23 of volume six, "The 1911 Edition of *The Great Controversy*," contains dramatic insights into the formation of *Great Controversy* and illustrates the horrendous difficulties created when research notes or manuscripts fail to give complete citations for sources used. In

this case, these problems were compounded by her "workers" quoting some materials incorrectly in order to make them, according to Mrs. White, "a little better" (VI: 311). It should be carefully read by all who seek publication, but especially by those interested in *Great Controversy's* circuitous road to publication. Apparently there were no formal citations in the original edition of *The Great Controversy* for the 417 quotations "drawn from seventy-five authors, ten periodicals, and three encyclopedias" (VI: 308). Either the manuscript for the 1888 edition had been lost or the citations had never existed there. Ellen White's memory of where she had copied these materials was apparently no help.

It simply boggles the mind that someone would not have urged Ellen White to adopt such a simple, and fairly obvious technique as writing down references to sources used, both as a help to those who would read the book as well as for her own use. Did no one want to check the accuracy or the context of a single quotation prior to printing and request a full reference from the author?

After some four months of research by a number of people in libraries in the United States and Europe, "almost all the quotations" had been located. Thus, "A minimum of quoted materials were left in quotation marks but without references" (VI: 308). Just how many quotations still remained without attribution is not indicated; even one should have been considered absolutely unacceptable (as it is for any college freshman paper in a reputable institution). None of this effort, of course, was directed toward finding the sources for paraphrased materials. There is no indication that anyone was embarrassed at the time by such problems.

These volumes are filled with fascinating minor details concerning Adventist history. In some instances these are interesting but easily forgettable items; in other instances readers may well wish for more information. "The author has encountered some differences of opinion in the minds of different readers as to the value of some of

the details presented," Arthur White states in the foreword of volume five. "It is his opinion that they make a major contribution to reading interest and rather intimate acquaintance with Ellen White, so they have been retained for the sake of the record" (V: 11–12). It is interesting to learn that Mrs. White's salary was only \$50 per month, but we are not told whether she received other allowances, "fringe benefits," or a "package deal," nor where this salary placed her on the denominational wage scale (V: 28). I leave other delightful trivia for the reader to look up: Ellen White's problems with false teeth (V: 142, 319); President Theodore Roosevelt bowing to her (V: 348); how she answered "a rather erratic church member who was on a crusade to save Seventh-day Adventists from the belief that the world is round" (V: 351); an unusual wedding at Elmshaven in 1906 (VI: 116); her shortest testimony (VI: 128); Loma Linda's original name (VI: 274); the make of the automobile in which Ellen White had her first ride (V: 144); and what she paid for her 1913 Studebaker (VI: 392).

The most puzzling aspect of this biography is the author's decision to write and publish backwards, beginning with the retirement years and working in reverse to the first volume on Ellen White's early years. Apparently it is the only multi-volume biography of an important American to have been produced in this manner.

Arthur White's justification for this procedure is twofold: (1) Some people involved in this period were still living and thus could be interviewed; (2) "It seemed that the issues that followed quickly on the turn of the century have a particular relevance to the church at present" (V: 10). The first reason is clearly lesser in weight, since any interviews could have been done and the results preserved for future use. Also, anyone of critical importance for the years 1900–1905 must surely now be extremely aged, with a memory highly suspect as far as recalling accurate details of the past. The second reason must obviously have con-

vinced the author as he witnessed disturbing problems in the church, with historic parallels to the last years of Ellen White's life. Another factor may well have been opera-

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tive: a major writing project is often begun with the section that presents the least difficulties. Arthur White would naturally feel most comfortable with that period of his grandmother's life that he had known personally as a child. Also, the author casually notes a fact that could only have been a source of great encouragement to any biographer: "The sources for this period (the Elmshaven years) are very full, almost overwhelming" (V: 10).

Arthur White is obviously concerned with possible charges that an inherent lack of objectivity disqualifies him as the author of this biography of his grandmother. Although admitting that "he takes pride in his relationship to the subject of the biography," he explains that "in the interests of objectivity (he) has, as in his public ministry, largely disassociated himself from family ties" (Foreword, V: 12). Some may seriously question whether this is a psychological possibility, but we have the author's declaration that "he has endeavored to relate himself to Ellen White as would any earnest Seventh-day Adventist in possession of a good knowledge of her work." Each reader must judge whether or not he has succeeded. He has, however, scrupulously adhered to his promise to not call Ellen White "Grandmother."

These disclaimers are not repeated in the foreword to volume six. Yet his opening sentence there is relevant and helpful: ". . . he [Arthur L. White] has spent his working lifetime involved in the custody of the Ellen G. White writings . . ." (VI: 9).

He succeeded William C. (“Willie”) White as secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate upon his father’s death in 1937, and retained this position until his retirement, so that he might devote full time to the writing of this biography.

For any author concerned with integrity and objectivity, truth should always be hotly pursued with the full knowledge that neither truth nor objectivity will be completely apprehended in this life. Such integrity, along with a clear statement from the author of his relationship to and involvement with the subject of his study, is all any reader can demand. Within the parameters established in the foreword to each of these volumes, and by his ancestry and dedicated work of a long lifetime, Arthur White has consistently maintained his integrity as an author.

I leave other delightful trivia for the reader to look up: the make of the automobile in which she had her first ride and what she paid for her 1913 Studebaker.

An inspection of the citations to sources in these volumes (using an informal but adequate system) and the bibliographies reveals that Arthur White has relied almost exclusively on the vast collection of primary materials in the White Estate, plus a few standard works by Adventist authors. Of the only 17 works by SDA authors other than Ellen White listed in the two bibliographies, plus the *SDA Yearbook* for 1889, all are by noncontroversial authors, except for *The Living Temple* by John Harvey Kellogg. They all are from SDA publishing houses with one puzzling exception: *The San Francisco Earthquake* by Gordon Thomas and Max Witts, published in New York in 1971 by Stein and Day.

Although Arthur White is undoubtedly familiar with recent relevant work by other

Adventist authors who have written concerning Ellen White—Ronald Numbers, Donald McAdams, Jonathan Butler, and Walter Rea—he makes no reference to them. Neither are there citations to relevant *Spectrum* articles, and surprisingly no references to Schwarz’s fine new college textbook of denominational history, *Light Bearers to the Remnant*.

Arthur White’s writing style is adequate and well-suited to his general Adventist audience. The high proportion of quoted materials set off in blocks may intimidate many readers; and yet these quotations probably constitute the most valuable part of the work, particularly those from the White Estate files not previously published.

Extreme caution should be exercised in using the indexes. They are highly selective in the items listed, and they are not complete even for those. In checking for specific items, a reader should scan the pages of the appropriate sections rather than rely on the indexes. Occasionally there are puzzling statements in the two volumes that in some instances might have been resolved by a more complete index, but doubtless many obscurities or confusions will be lessened when a reader can study the completed biography in chronological order. In a work of this length and detail (almost 900 pages of text in these two volumes), errors, either factual or typographical, are impressively few, and none is of major significance.

The pictures in both volumes illustrate the text well. Probably most readers will complain that there are not more—particularly of Ellen White. Especially fascinating are the dress and hair styles. Those still high collars must have been particularly uncomfortable for the men. Albion F. Ballenger sports an absolutely fantastic mustache, and W. C. White ranks as an impressive modern patriarch with his luxuriant beard and mustache, and his fierce eyes.

With one exception, materials in the appendices seem well-chosen and valuable to have in their original form. The materials on the Kellogg-Ballenger errors are clearly

relevant to Adventists of the 1980s, and the details on the settlement of Ellen White's estate are interesting and informative. However, the document headed "A. G. Daniells' March 15, 1910, Letter to a Former Pacific Union Conference President" is puzzling. What justification is there for printing this letter in full? Why should the union president's name be deleted here and in the text when virtually everyone else of any importance (and many minor figures) are named, including those, such as Kellogg and Ballenger, who are thoroughly denounced? It is difficult to know how this document relates to the text and when it should be consulted. It conveys a strongly supportive attitude on the part of Elder Daniells, the General Conference president at that time, of Sister White, but even more so, it seems, of Willie White. Is this why it was printed?

These are fascinating and important books for all mature, thoughtful Adventists. All six volumes should be carefully read as they appear, or, read in normal chronolog-

ical order once the set is complete. Perhaps the most valuable aid for the serious reader would be a copy of Richard Schwarz's nicely balanced and scholarly college-level denominational history textbook, *Light Bearers to the Remnant*, which can be consulted with profit on almost any topic treated by Arthur White. At the very least, it would provide an invaluable historical framework for this lengthy and detailed biography.

Arthur White has performed an invaluable service for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. His work is unique because of his unique experience and position. The completed six volumes will constitute as near a "definitive official biography" of Ellen G. White as we are likely ever to have. Ideally this magnum opus will stimulate many articles and even a one-volume topical treatment of Ellen G. White.

"I know in whom I have believed," were Ellen White's last words. Surely she would find this work by her youngest grandson a confirming witness to her long and productive life of faith and works.