

Adventism in the Life of Wright Morris

Wright Morris. *A Life*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 152 pp., paper, \$3.95.

_____. *Fire Sermon* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 155 pp., paper, \$3.50.

_____. *Will's Boy: A Memoir* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981, cloth, \$11.95.

Reviewed by Beatrice Jensen Smith

A good Adventist is hard to find in fiction, but Wright Morris's *A Life* offers a candidate. *A Life*, found in a Santa Fe bookshop in the section labeled "Partial New Mexico Setting," was my first Wright Morris. Reading aloud as my husband and I drove through the southwestern desert, I was captured by the vernacular authenticity of character and the poetic-meditative voice, then intrigued by the rare counterpoint between an unbeliever and, of all people, his Seventh-day Adventist sister.

Five years later, I own more than 20 of the nearly 35 Morris titles, which include fiction, photography, criticism, and autobiography. They have been produced in a remarkably steady flow, beginning in 1942 with *My Uncle Dudley* and still counting with his *Collected Stories*, 1986. Truly a writer's writer, as well as a photographer's photographer, Morris taught literature and creative writing at San Francisco State University, retiring in 1975. Among many honors, he holds the National Book Award for *The Field of Vision* (1956), and the American Book Award for *Plains Song* (1980). Though his name hasn't the easy ring of recognition won by a Hemingway or Steinbeck, appreciative critics and readers do not hesitate to place him among America's most gifted and distinguished authors.

In *Will's Boy: A Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), Morris, a native of Nebraska, writes that his mother, Grace, youngest daughter of a Seventh-day Adventist farmer and lay preacher, died within a week of his birth. Although her married sister pleaded to be permitted to care for the infant, Will Morris chose to raise his son himself. Until age 19, Wright Morris was completely separated from his mother's family. During his infancy they had moved to a new Adventist community in Boise, Idaho.

While his preoccupied father earned a living and sought surrogates to mother the boy, young Morris lived a Huckleberry Finn childhood in towns along the Platte River, in Omaha, and in Chicago. After finishing high school, he received the first of many letters from his aunt, Winona Osborn, in Boise. She wanted her nephew to feel a part of his mother's family and turned his life around with word of Grandfather Osborn's wish to pay for his schooling in an Adventist college.

As Morris met the Osborns in Boise for the first time, he felt in their manner and their loving memories of his mother "an image of human goodness that I had been lacking." He also sensed that their belief "need not be good for me to be good in itself" (p. 161). Although he never became an Adventist, the faith of the Osborns did have its impact on his life and art.

Morris might have graduated from Pacific Union College had his career there, circa 1930, not ended inside a month. For a freshman who had honed sportsmanship at a Chicago YMCA and still had visions of Ivy League colleges, this had to be an eye-opening time. Here was a gymnasium floor waxed like new but forbidden for use in competitive sports, later featured in his novel, *The Fork River Space Project* (1977). More surprising still were the literal views of Bible stories, particularly the short-term creation.

Willing to learn, but gifted in promoting his own points in dormitory debates on the implications of mastodons and petrified trees, Morris was soon invited to the office of the dean. He had been linked to a variety of incidents that demonstrated his unpreparedness for Adventist lifestyle and

doctrine. Though there had been no real wrongdoing, and despite his ingenuous appeal for a second chance, the dean felt it best that he continue his education elsewhere. Winona Osborn's response to her nephew's abrupt dismissal was a letter lovingly assuring him that this, too, must be according to God's will. She approved his plan to work for a time on her brother Dwight's Texas farm.

Uncle Dwight, in stark contrast, proved to be a confirmed evolutionist with an intense disdain for his Adventist father. Uncle Dwight praised Morris for being thrown out of a school that taught only lies. With ardor akin to Winona's, Dwight missed three days of plowing to teach him Nature's creative power at the Carlsbad Caverns (p. 181).

The distinctive behaviors and experience of Dwight and Winona have been imaginatively recaptured and restructured in the art of their nephew. In two short, related novels, Morris profiles his familial favorites against the hippie era of the 1960s. *Fire Sermon* (1971) introduces 82-year-old Floyd Warner, like Dwight an agnostic with a believing sister. The novel develops the theme of age and youth in confrontation: age gives way as generations of Warner (Osborn) family artifacts go up in fiery ashes, and two crass young hippies, untouched, get on with the dance of life.

In *A Life* (1973), old man Warner appears again. In his litany of vexations and memories, his entire past interfaces with events of his last two days. His sister Viola, like Winona Osborn a Seventh-day Adventist, has died and presumably gone to heaven. Warner sees his own life at "dead end." He meets, with mild surprise, then observant, conscious acceptance, a bizarre sort of euthanasia. On reflection this end seems curiously right for an old scoffer with no taste for eternal life.

Morris is in no sense an "Adventist writer," but he does picture in the character, Viola, an attractive Adventist foil for a studied agnostic. In her weekly letters Viola expresses a firm trust in God's will, and bears with humor her brother's

jibes against creation and heaven. Perhaps with more desire than conviction, she insists that God, though sorely tried, will find enough good in her brother to save him.

The author does permit Viola one surprising variance from the Adventist view of soul sleep. In the novel, *Fire Sermon*, she disconcerts the orphan Kermit, by writing him that in heaven his mother's loving eyes are always upon him. Though her religion is not identified in *Fire Sermon*, the idea of instant passage to heaven continues in *A Life*, where she is clearly an Adventist.

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Otherwise, reference to specific Adventist teaching in *A Life* is limited but generally authentic. The aging Warner recalls a baptism in the Platte River, his future bride emerging, gasping for air. Elsewhere he notes with chagrin that his own distaste for tobacco chewing and immorality stem from parental example. Conversely, he abhors hymn singing for its reminder of his father's voice and exults in profanity to show contempt for his religion. In boyhood, he "refused to observe the Adventist sabbath or any day as holy" (p. 23) studying Ingersoll instead. His revulsion for his father is a strong but elusive theme, based mostly on the early death of his mother in childbirth. But Viola offers a deeper insight: that father and son were set in a battle of wills. If the father had prior claim on the love of God, the son, already alienated, might reject that "monstrous" love outright.

Nearly all Morris's books are available in paperback in University of Nebraska Press Bison Book Editions. In his photo-texts—*The Home Place* (1948), *The World in the Attic* (1949), and particularly *God's Country and My People* (1968)—the author features direct reflections on family personalities, including Dwight, Winona, and the Adventist grandfather for whom he was named.

Morris's sensitive farewell portrait of his 85-year-old Aunt Winona, "Real Losses, Imaginary Gains," is included in his *Collected Stories 1948-1986*. As the gentle, aging aunt who had never married, her "first love" being dedicated to God, she is shown giving "proven sinners three or four times their share of her concern and love" (p. 156). "In her presence I was subject to fevers of faith, to fits of stark belief," writes Morris. "Like the grandfather, she saw me as a preacher in search of a flock" (p. 159).

In the Clear Light of Myth

George R. Knight. *Myths in Adventism: An Interpretive Study of Ellen White, Education, and Related Issues* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1985). 272 pp.

Reviewed by Steve Daily

On the dust jacket of *Myths in Adventism*, Robert Olson asserts that, "This book is destined to become a classic work on how to interpret and apply the writings of Ellen White to Seventh-day Adventist life." George Knight has made a commendable attempt to help Adventists better relate to our misunderstood spiritual mother. The book is not the kind of uncritical, confessional, or apologetic history to which Adventists have become too accustomed. Nor is it the kind of reactionary, iconoclastic approach, typified by authors from Canright to Rea, that attempts to debunk apologists for the church.

This is a book that stresses balance and context. It suggests that because of our own tendencies toward rigidity, perfectionism, historical myopia,

projection, bias, and spiritual apathy, we have generally misinterpreted the prophet, or misunderstood our spiritual mother, "Mother" White was balanced and normal, but she has been misunderstood by "kids" who are inclined to be dysfunctional and abnormal.

This book is filled with fascinating insights and interesting historical details, but the nagging question remains: if mother was so clear and straightforward in what she wanted to communicate, why do we need to go to such pains to interpret and explain what she meant?

The book has many more strengths than weaknesses. First of all, it is well researched. Knight has drawn on a wide spectrum of impressive sources to document the arguments that he presents. Secondly, the author has written in a popular style that makes for easy reading and should appeal to a general readership within the Adventist community. Thirdly, there is no obvious ideological bias or polemical intent in the author's interpretation of Ellen White. Fourthly, the book is constructively critical. It not only attempts to expose a number of popular Adventist myths (defined as false beliefs that are generally held to be true, p.11), but suggests a positive hermeneutical approach to Ellen White's writings that will help to minimize the embarrassing infighting that typically occurs when church members try to "prove a point" with an "inspired" reference.

Finally, I found the book to be filled with informative insights, particularly in the area of Seventh-day Adventist education. In recent years Ellen White studies have focused on the areas of health (Numbers), eschatology (Butler), literary borrowing (Rea), and personal family life (Graybill). In a less controversial manner, Knight has now provided us with a broader understanding of Ellen White's role in the institutional development of Adventist education.

Some of the most prominent educational "myths" that Knight discusses are: (1) The myth of the good old days—the belief that the early years of Adventist education provided a detailed account of the "secular" approach to education that Adventists practiced in Battle Creek during the 1870s and 1880s. (2) The myth of accreditation, which has been based on the traditional as-

sumption that Ellen White was opposed to accreditation. Knight shows that E. A. Sutherland, rather than Ellen White, was the voice behind the antiaccreditation movement in the church. (3) The myths of the omnipotent school and teacherless home. The author presents strong arguments against the popular trend of full-time professional parents trying to raise Christian children. (4) The myths of the ignorant Christian and the Bible as omniscient textbook. Knight deals with the anti-intellectual bias in Adventist history and reductionist approaches to Adventist educational curriculums.

From this reviewer's perspective, the most apparent weaknesses in the book can be summarized under two general headings. First, the author focuses on educational myths as his subject matter, but strays marginally into other areas that may not even be tangentially related to education. Some of the chapters dealing with literary myths, human nature, hierarchicalism, sacred versus secular, and recreation could have been tied more specifically to the book's theme of education. This may be the reason that the editors suggested the title *Myths in Adventism* over the author's proposed title, *Myths in Adventist Education*. But the book would read more clearly and cohesively if it limited its focus to Adventist education.

Secondly, the author has not adequately addressed the question of Ellen White's own inconsistencies, or the evolutionary development of her thought. There seems to be a tendency on Knight's part to assume that all of the problems and contradictory views relating to education,

which claim to be based on the prophet's writings, can be laid at the doorstep of extremist interpreters. Knight asserts they have simply failed to recognize that Ellen White was very consistent and balanced in her views. While the author acknowledges that Ellen White was generally not systematic in her approach to the various subjects that she addressed, he consistently uses quotations from her writings in an authoritative manner to support his arguments.

Knight fails to deal with the "megamyth" that "Ellen White's writings are totally consistent if they are only studied in their proper historical context and approached systematically." Because she wrote so much, on so many topics, over a span of so many years, it is easy to find statements from her writings that will support contradictory viewpoints. No set of principles on how to interpret her writings can free us from the tension and pluralism that exist with regard to the extent of her authority in the church.

In part because Ellen White was a balanced person, she clearly expressed her position to church leaders before the 1901 General Conference. She said,

Quote the Bible, make the Bible the source of authority to which you appeal. When you adopt this practice you will better understand the benefit from my writings. Do not repeat what I have said, saying, 'Sister White said this,' and 'Sister White said that.' Find out what the Lord God of Israel says, and then do what He commands.

The greatest myth in Adventism is the myth that our spiritual mother provided us with a systematic body of literature that frees us from the continuing responsibility of doing creative moral thinking.