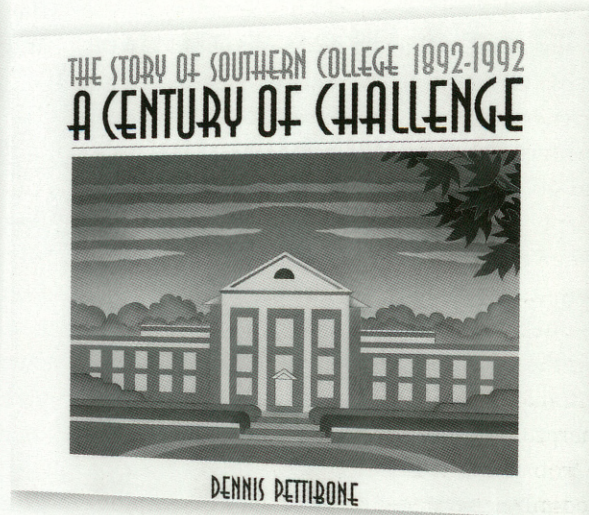
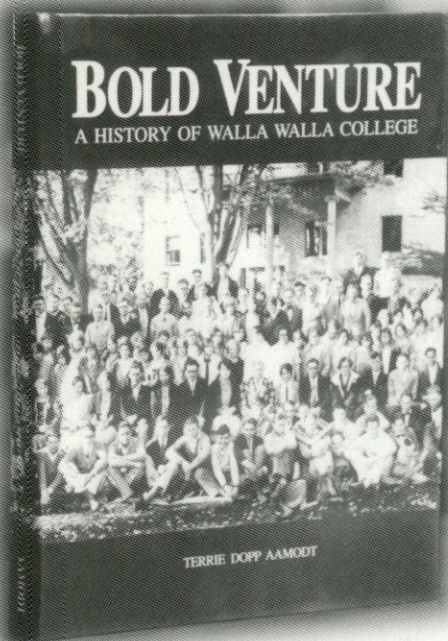


SAGA, HEROES, SYMBOLS, & RITUALS



Bold Venture: A History of Walla Walla College. By Terrie Dopp Aamodt. College Place, Wash.: Walla Walla College, 1992.

A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College 1892-1992. By Dennis Pettibone. Collegedale, Tenn.: Board of Trustees, Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992.

Reviewed by William G. White Jr.

It is good that the “dead know not anything” because the founders of Southern and Walla Walla Colleges would be disappointed today that the institutions they created in 1892 are still alive. True to their Millerite roots, founders, early faculty, and students, eagerly anticipated the Second Advent and invested time and talents to hasten it. In fact, the futuristic orientation that dominated many Adventist campuses for decades prevented much attention to the history of the colleges.

When Walla Walla paused to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary on December 7, 1942, history professor Percy Christian urged colleagues and students to consider the college's history. "We are an unhistorical people," said Christian, "but it is high time we awake from our lethargy in this respect. We should remember on this anniversary day the way the Lord has lead this college for fifty years. How can we recall his leadership if we never hear of it? Surely a college that is fifty years old has a history."¹

Surely colleges one hundred years old should have written histories. Thanks to the efforts of Terrie Aamodt and Dennis Pettibone, the histories of Walla Walla College and Southern College have been expertly researched and delightfully written so that we can recall the providence of God and the hard work of thousands of men and women. However, the authors have done more than present the histories of two colleges; they have also presented a kaleidoscope of the Adventist Church during the past century.

Like the founders of Harvard, Adventists of the late-nineteenth century realized that colleges are essential for the transmission and preservation of a cultural and religious heritage. As with the founders of other colleges, Adventists have also learned that institutions of higher education not only reflect prevailing social and cultural conditions, but also afford insights into what will occur.

Examining the histories of Walla Walla and Southern Colleges is really like looking at the scrapbooks and photo albums of the Adventist family—a family that created the colleges and has been regenerated by them. Examination allows us to witness growth and maturation of the colleges along with—and sometimes in advance of—that of the larger family. It also permits us to glimpse changing understandings about the role of higher education in the Adventist subculture.

The concept that colleges not only reflect and perpetuate a larger culture but also have an organizational culture of their own has been of special interest during the past two decades among students of higher education. Defined as an amalgam of beliefs, ideology, language, ritual, and myth—and as the glue that holds organizations together—institutional culture helps explain how organizations arrive at various states. Organizational culture profoundly influences institutional behavior through people within the organization; induces purpose, commitment, and order; and provides meaning and social cohesion. Several factors determine the strength of institutional culture, including the size

of an institution and its longevity. Smaller colleges and institutions with longer histories have stronger cultures.

An institution's culture has windows that offer perspectives on past and present cultural influences. Four of the most important such windows are saga, heroes, symbols, and rituals. Although promoted as centennial histories of Southern and Walla Walla Colleges, *A Century of Challenge* and *Bold Venture* are really much more. They are both successful attempts to open windows through which to view the culture of these two colleges in terms of sagas, heroes, symbols, and rituals.

Saga

Saga has its roots in an institution's history, describes its unique accomplishments, and codifies that which sets one college apart from another. Organizational saga, according to B. R. Clark, is a "narrative of heroic exploits, of a unique development that has deeply stirred the emotions of participants and descendants" and is a "collective understanding of unique accomplishment" in an institution.²

Sagas attempt to explain rationally how an institution came to its present state and include affective information that transforms a formal organization into a beloved institution to which participants can be passionately devoted. Saga is a set of shared beliefs, values, and ideologies tied together in a story about the institution's past; it is a powerful force for unity. In addition, it strengthens bonds between an institution's faculty, staff, students, and alumni; intensifies organizational commitment; and encourages feelings of membership in a special community.

Aamodt and Pettibone devote most of their work to telling sagas, as one would expect with centennial college histories. As they proceed with the stories of Walla Walla and Southern, it quickly becomes apparent that each college has many sagas. Both authors do fine jobs of recounting the more important ones.

Aamodt skillfully tells the story of Walla Walla's founding, a more complicated birth than that of other Adventist colleges because of rivalries between Adventist communities in the Northwest that wanted the college, involvement of the Walla Walla business community, and overextended and faltering lines of control held by the General Conference in Battle Creek. The author does an excellent job of placing collegiate developments in the broader context of the secular world and the Adventist subculture.

Aamodt does not overlook unhappy episodes in the

college's history. She does justice to one of the saddest—the upheaval of 1938—when under the cloak of concern for theological orthodoxy the General Conference joined hands with some in the Northwest to terminate or force the resignations of President William Landeen, School of Theology dean Frederick Schilling, and religion professors Harold Bass and Homer Saxton.

This story has only recently been told. (In 1997, *Spectrum* published Aamodt's account.) In 1976 when I visited the campus and reviewed board minutes for research on the college's struggle for regional accreditation—which it achieved in 1935—the board required me to pledge not to go beyond that point in the minutes. This represented an attempt to keep details of those proceedings under wraps. Ellen White was correct to say that that we have nothing to fear for the future, but some of us may still have things to fear from the past.

It is interesting that two institutions founded in 1892 by the same denomination developed in different ways. These differences can probably be attributed to the society of the Middle South that Pettibone describes, to the comparative youthfulness of the Adventist Church in the South, and to Southern's origins as a secondary-industrial school. In contrast, Walla Walla began ostensibly as a liberal arts college with a classical curriculum. Perhaps the early psyche of Southern was also shaped by the arrest of a number of Southern's faculty, who ran afoul of Tennessee's Sunday laws and served time on chain gangs a few years after the school's founding at Graysville.

By the spring of 1916, officials had decided to move the school. Pettibone's story allows us to join the committee empowered to find a new location as it looked into potential sites in Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee, sampled soil, and tasted spring water. Pettibone paints a quaint picture of the move from Graysville to the Thatcher farm near Chattanooga, with most of the school's possessions and livestock loaded onto two wagons and a buggy and a dozen Jersey cows in tow. The story of the primitive conditions that students and faculty endured is surely the stuff of sagas.

Heroes

An institution's heroes or saints—those who are important to an institution and often represent ideals and values in human form—play a central role in a college's saga. They serve as role models, set standards, and preserve unique features of an institution.

The stories of Southern and Walla Walla that the authors tell are captivating and alive because of attention they devote to the great men and women who created the institutions and made them what they were, are, and will be. Southern's saga includes heroes like Robert M. Kilgore, "Father of Southern College;" George W. Colcord, who established not only Graysville Academy but also Milton Academy, forerunner of Walla Walla College; Marshall B. Van Kirk, who began the transformation from training school to junior college; John H. Talge, an Indiana manufacturer who generously provided flows of money, furniture, and encouragement; and heroines like Maude I. Jones, beloved English teacher for thirty-five years.

What would Southern have been like without Ambrose L. Suhrie, who adopted the Adventist faith and Southern in 1945 after a distinguished half-century career in higher education and became the school's resident educational consultant? Suhrie left his mark not only on grounds that he helped to beautify with thousands of trees but also on the hearts of students and colleagues. While terminally ill in 1956, he wrote a final message to his colleagues: "Let's all try to teach more and preach less; live more and say less; guide more and drive less. What we are is vastly more important than anything we can do or say."³

Another noteworthy, Kenneth A. Wright, worked with Suhrie to gain senior college status and full accreditation for Southern. The list of heroes would be incomplete without the name of Charles Fleming Jr., long-time business manager who served in other capacities as well for four decades.

For Walla Walla, even a partial listing of campus greats would include Nelson G. Blalock, local physician and college patron; local church administrator Henry W. Decker, whose vision for the college was so much greater than that of his contemporaries that they probably viewed him more as a rascal than the "Father of Walla Walla College;" president-reformer Edward A. Sutherland, later of Battle Creek, Berrien Springs, and Madison fame; and Clara E. Rogers, who at one time or another served as preceptress, English teacher, and registrar for more than forty years.

Nor can one omit Frank W. Peterson, business manager for thirty-three years, whose financial abilities led the college through two world wars, the boom of the 1920s, and the bust of the 1930s; William Landeen, who guided the college to regional accreditation; George W. Bowers, who succeeded Landeen and served as a healing

agent after the upheaval of 1938; or Edward F. Cross, who directed the engineering program for twenty-seven years from its birth through full accreditation.

Symbols

Symbols can represent implicit cultural values and beliefs and be concrete examples of values present on a campus. Because language is a symbol system, words people use when talking about an institution reveal something about culture. Even metaphors developed to express concepts usually difficult to verbalize help describe culture.

Although Walla Walla and Southern are parts of a common Adventist society, their cultural symbols have been different sometimes. One common Adventist symbol that each college espoused was the "industrial" program, which Aamodt and Pettibone discuss in a more forthright manner than most Adventist audiences have come to expect. Rather than discussing the classic Adventist defense for combining academic study and manual labor on the school farm or industry, the authors present honest perspectives on related problems.

For Southern, Pettibone provides an excellent analysis of the college's work program and details some of its personal benefits in terms of finance and character building, but he also includes an honest assessment of the overall negative impact of industrial operations on college finances. "Southern's industrial supervisors," he writes, "learned that it was easier to find students who needed to work their way through school than it was to make a profit with their labor."⁴

Both colleges had difficulties with their farm programs, one of the most sacred symbols of Adventist education for much of the past century. Pettibone details the persistent but ultimately futile efforts of Southern administrators to save their money-losing farm operation, and Aamodt discusses similar problems at Walla Walla. She also describes the college's troubled industrial program and the faculty's open protest during the first decade of the twentieth century because of their expected supervision of student laborers. Walla Walla students and parents protested as well, making it known that most students considered higher learning a gateway to the favored Adventist professions of teaching, nursing, medicine, and ministry, rather than a training ground for manual labor skills that could be acquired at home without sacrificial outlay of tuition.

Buildings also carry symbolic meaning. Southern's

reliance on frame buildings of a more temporary nature as opposed to Walla Walla's more imposing and durable brick structures may tell us something about notions of permanence and community expectations. More revealing, perhaps, is Aamodt's discussion of President Ernest Kellogg's attempt to identify the college with older and more prestigious seats of learning by transplanting ivy to Walla Walla from the University of Oregon, which itself had borrowed its ivy from Yale. In time, Walla Walla's ivy covered much of the main college building's facade and took its place beside the Mountain Ash Tree, which had been planted in 1897 to symbolize the learning and language of ancient Greece.

Aamodt describes other significant symbols at Walla Walla as well. A good example was Columbia Auditorium, the forty-year-old recreational, cultural, and emotional center of the college that an arsonist's fire destroyed in 1978.

A good deal of symbolism on both campuses has revolved around the concept of institutional mission. Both colleges were founded essentially to provide qualified employees for the Church in various enterprises throughout the world and employed almost of their graduates until the Great Depression. Yet this particular dimension of the colleges' enlarging and increasingly complex missions remained a focal point beyond that time, more so at Southern than at Walla Walla.

Indeed, at Southern, the concept of service to the cause was involved in some of its name changes, especially with recent deletion of the word "missionary." Pettibone does an excellent job of addressing the importance that the college attached to preparation of students for church service at home and abroad as well as the symbolic importance of this function in the college's relationship with students, faculty, constituents, and church hierarchy.

The symbolism of education for service was also pervasive at Walla Walla. Aamodt gives careful consideration to preparation of a long and venerable line of foreign missionaries who went out from the college and urged others to prepare for similar service. We learn about the Gateway to Service, the brick pillared entrance to campus given by the class of 1918 through which for twenty years processions of graduates passed as they left the commencement ceremony, thus symbolically entering into a lifetime of service. When Columbia Auditorium replaced the campus sanctuary as the commencement site, graduates were reminded about service by a world map lit with lights that represented the precise location of every college graduate who worked for the Church.

Rituals

Rituals also identify cultural values, beliefs, and ideologies. Rituals provide continuity with the past and demonstrate that old values and beliefs still play a role in campus life. Although Adventists have tried to banish most rituals from worship and other aspects of corporate culture, they have contributed to the way faculty and students have understood their environments, as Pettibone and Aamodt explain.

At both institutions, for example, the ritual of public devotions and worship played a significant role. Both authors describe chapel services, morning and evening devotions, weeks of prayer, Friday evening vespers, and Sabbath morning worship services. On both campuses, organizations and activities related to foreign missions played important roles as ritual and symbols. Pettibone describes the annual ritual of Southern's Harvest Ingathering field days that persisted for decades. There were also repeated student association fund-raisers, rituals that surely became distasteful to many on campus and among the constituency after a while.

Aamodt depicts the Walla Walla ritual of planting Mountain Ash Trees beginning in 1897 with a ceremony that commemorated the ancient languages. She describes the important ritual of the annual commencement ceremony, which in the 1930s included debates among faculty and students over the use of academic regalia—an issue that had real cultural and theological implications in the minds of many at that time. For some, use of such supposedly “Catholic” symbols made commencement smack of too much ritual.

Both authors have done thorough jobs of research and writing, as expected of scholars. Aamodt holds a Ph.D. in American and New England studies from Boston University, whereas Pettibone earned his doctorate in history at the University of California at Riverside. Not all scholars, however, are able to write in the engaging manner of these two authors. Although Aamodt's writing assumes fluency in “Adventese,” Pettibone has taken pains to demystify some Adventist language and culture for the non-Adventist reader.

Pettibone and Aamodt have presented positive and sympathetic views of the two institutions, but they have not succumbed to propaganda or hagiography. They emphasize the good, yet present balanced views. Both have chronicled painful experiences along with the joy. Both have also described rascals as well as saints, the bumbling as well as the competent.

As noted earlier, it is the people about which both authors write that bring the stories to life. Both authors have included a wealth of biographical information about founders, trustees, faculty, and students. Pettibone has spliced these details into the narrative, which sometimes causes the reader to lose train of thought. Aamodt's use of biography more effectively highlights the contributions of individuals and preserves the narrative from frequent interruptions.

Both books are lavishly illustrated with photographs, many professionally retouched or restored for better reproduction. It is unfortunate that more people in the photos were not identified. Many readers will miss the pleasure of seeing ancestors, relatives, and former teachers simply because they cannot be recognized in their halcyon days. Although there is a danger of showing too many photographs of buildings, Pettibone has succeeded giving readers an historic, and often panoramic, view of development on the Southern campus. On the other hand, Aamodt could have facilitated orientation with a few aerial or panoramic views of the campus for those unfamiliar with Walla Walla's layout.

Percy Christian was right: colleges have histories. Aamodt and Pettibone have done well chronicling the histories of Walla Walla and Southern. Their efforts are worthwhile because studying the evocative narratives and devotional ties of colleges leads to a better understanding of their fundamental capacities to enhance or diminish the lives of participants. Thanks to the work of Aamodt and Pettibone, we can understand better how these two colleges have enhanced the lives of thousands of people and the life of the Church. We can also be reassured that they will continue to enhance the lives of those who love and support them.

Notes and References

1. Aamodt, *Bold Venture*, 122.
2. B. R. Clark, “The Organizational Saga in Higher Education,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1972) vol. 17, no. 2, 178.
3. Pettibone, *Century of Challenge*, 151.
4. *Ibid.*, 189.

William G. White Jr. is professor of educational leadership at Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana.
Wgwhite@bayou.com