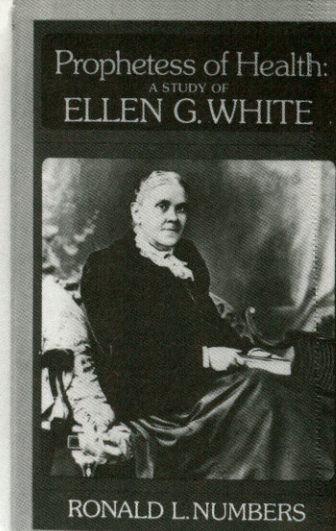


*Two thousand one marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Ronald Numbers's *Prophetess of Health*, a landmark in the study of Seventh-day Adventist history and Ellen G. White. Spectrum's editors have invited two authorities on these subjects, Gary Land and Herbert E. Douglass, to reflect on the meaning and impact of Numbers's book in subsequent years. Readers interested in Spectrum's initial response to *Prophetess of Health* will find the complete January 1977 issue published on the Spectrum Web site: www.spectrummagazine.org*



An Ambiguous Legacy

A Retrospective Review of *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*.

By Ronald L. Numbers. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.

By Gary Land

Re-reading *Prophetess of Health* twenty-five years after publication has been a complex experience. Although I had frequently used the book for reference purposes during the intervening years, I had not actually read it since about 1977. Going through its pages again brought back memories of the arguments and anxieties that once swirled around this volume. At the same time, my recent reading often caused me to wonder what all the fuss had been about, for in 2001 Numbers's book does not seem all that radical. But then, it must be noted that I defended the volume in the pages of this journal in 1978 and did not at that time regard *Prophetess of Health* as especially disturbing.¹

We need to understand that at the time *Prophetess of Health* appeared, most Adventists knew only what the Church published regarding Ellen White. Although D. M. Canright's books and others that largely drew from him circulated among dissidents and critics of Adventism, it is unlikely that many church members were acquainted with these works. Rather, books such as T. H. Jemison's *A Prophet Among You*,² study programs like "Testimony Countdown," *Review and Herald* articles, and lectures and sermons by Ellen G. White Estate staff were the principal sources of information regarding Ellen White for most Adventists.

Among Adventist scholars, the situation was little different. Although individuals were aware of various problems, until the late 1960s there was no public forum where such issues could be openly and safely discussed. Thus, when *Spectrum* proposed in 1970 that Ellen White should be studied with the same critical methods applied to other writers, W. Paul Bradley of the White Estate responded that such scholarship was unnecessary and that faith should play the predominant role in determining one's attitude toward and understanding of the prophetess.³

In 1970, *Spectrum* also published William S. Peterson's analysis of the *Great Controversy's* treatment of the French Revolution.⁴ Although his argument that White depended on Sir Walter Scott and James A. Wylie in writing her account anticipated Numbers's approach and prompted others to study the issue, Peterson does not seem to have made a significant impact on Adventist consciousness outside membership of the Association of Adventist Forums.

Thus, when Numbers published his findings in book form through a major publishing house, he attracted a level of attention from the church leadership that a few *Spectrum* articles probably could never achieve. Further-



Ellen G. White (center) at unknown camp meeting.

more, and I think this was extremely important, Numbers addressed Ellen White's health teachings, which not only formed the basis for the "right arm of the message," but also provided scientific evidence useful in Adventist apologetics because they seemed to anticipate many twentieth-century findings regarding nutrition. Criticism of Ellen White as a health reformer, therefore, had potential impact on both the denomination's theology in general, for Ellen White's writings carried considerable authority in the realms of biblical interpretation and doctrine, and Adventism's extensive health endeavors, which more than anything else shaped the public image of the Church.

Into this milieu Numbers introduced *Prophets of Health*. Surreptitious copies of the manuscript had circulated prior to publication and the White Estate had already launched an aggressive defense, all of which guaranteed considerable attention. After the book's publication, *Time* magazine ran a story about the storm it had caused.⁵ In a sense, the cat was out of the bag, for Ellen White was now a matter of uncontrollable public discussion within Adventism, both among scholars and general church members.⁶

So what did Numbers say that caused so much controversy? First, he announced at the outset that he "refrained from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation" (xi), an approach that in conservative Christian circles today would be called "methodological naturalism." Consequently, he looked to White's historical milieu for evidence to explain the positions that she took on health matters.

Second, Numbers argued that White gained her health information from such reformers as L. B. Coles, Dio Lewis, and James C. Jackson. Indeed—and for many people this was the most startling aspect of the book—according to Numbers, she not only obtained her information from others, but also copied or thinly paraphrased their words in what she presented as her own divinely inspired writings. In several places, Numbers sought to demonstrate this dependence by putting in parallel columns White's words and those of Horace Mann and Coles (155-56, 162-63, 166-67, and 232-33).

Third, Numbers looked at Ellen White developmentally. He saw her as a changing, maturing woman

who was not always consistent. From the late 1840s through the 1850s, for instance, White's attitude toward reliance on physicians moved from absolute rejection to moderate acceptance. Her later campaign to shorten women's skirts (the "reform dress"), which she pursued with considerable effort beginning in the mid-1860s, ended without success in 1875, when she declared that the Lord had lifted this burden from her. Similarly, her concerns with masturbation and "marital excess" largely disappeared after 1870. Perhaps most significantly, Numbers pointed out—although he did not posit a causal connection—that White's daytime visions appear to have stopped when she was about fifty-two years of age, the same time that she was experiencing a difficult menopause.⁷

Fourth, Numbers recounted elements in White's health writings that modern science did not substantiate. Probably the most notorious of these was her experimentation with phrenology, a movement popular among health reformers of the day. Not only did she take her sons for a reading, but she also used phrenological concepts to explain the effects of such things as wigs and prenatal influence. She also used the then-popular idea of "vital force" to explain why sexual activity should be limited. And she condemned such items as meat, butter, eggs, and cheese on the basis that they aroused man's animal nature.

Finally, Numbers described White's own personal struggles in following the diet that she recommended. Adopting vegetarianism soon after her 1863 vision dealing with health, she seems to have resumed eating meat sometime after 1869 and did not gain "victory over her appetite for meat" until 1894 (172). Even more disturbing was the implication that her diet—as well as that of other Adventists—occasionally included oysters, which church members now regard as an "unclean food."

Although these were among the issues that attracted the attention of Adventists, in retrospect Numbers did not write a negative book when one compares it with typical historical scholarship. Arguing that Ellen White was a part of her culture is not surprising to historians who have no commitment to

Adventism. Indeed, during my graduate program in American cultural and intellectual history I had often noted parallels between the nineteenth century American culture and Ellen White, though I had never pursued serious study of any of these issues. But Numbers not only said she was a child of her times, he also demonstrated how she creatively interacted with her surrounding culture, in turn shaping the Adventist subculture. Wrote Numbers: "In a fundamental way her life had been a paradox. Although consumed with making preparations for the next world, she nevertheless devoted much of her energy toward improving life and health in this one" (200). In the end, he concluded, she made a religion out of health reform, and the medical institutions operated by Seventh-day Adventists are "a memorial to the life and work of Ellen G. White, prophetess of health" (201).

Although little additional research on Ellen White as a health reformer has appeared in subsequent years, work on other aspects of her writing has progressed. Walter Rea's polemical the *White Lie* called attention to White's literary borrowing in works such as *Patriarchs and Prophets* and the *Desire of Ages*.⁸ These arguments in turn prompted the White Estate to sponsor a study by Fred Veltman that corroborated her extensive borrowing.⁹ Thus, the general trend of much of the research has broadened our understanding of Ellen White's indebtedness to her culture.

But what meaning has this discussion of Ellen White had for the Church? At the spring 2001 meeting of the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians, at which Numbers spoke, an informal debate developed regarding whether the Church has accepted his findings. Although I cannot definitively resolve this issue because a more systematic investigation should be pursued, what follows are a few impressions based upon perusal of some recent books.

Although Arthur L. White's multivolume biography of his grandmother seems oblivious to Numbers's arguments, Herbert E. Douglass's *Messenger of the Lord*, which probably can be taken as an authoritative statement of the Ellen G. White Estate, faces the evidence directly (although it should be noted that nowhere does he state that he is responding to Numbers).¹⁰ He generally accepts many of the facts Numbers put forward but minimizes their importance. Douglass, for instance, admits that Ellen White ate meat occasionally (314-16), recognizes that "Mrs. White's use of literary sources is evident in almost all of her books" (461), accepts that Ellen White denied her dependence on others (462), and acknowledges that

she made strong statements about the effects of masturbation and used phrenological language (493-95). In virtually every case, however, Douglass regards the factual evidence as insignificant. Her eating of meat, he argues, shows that she was not a fanatic; her denials of dependence on others' writings reveals that she wanted to emphasize her message rather than her methods; her comments on masturbation should be understood as referring primarily to mental rather than physical effects; and phrenology was the common language of the time (for page numbers, see the references above).

Where Douglass continues to express strong disagreements with Numbers, it tends to be in areas where the evidence is not so direct and interpretation rises to the fore. With regard to the "Shut Door," which Numbers believes White taught until about 1851, Douglass claims in what to me seems a tortuous argument that she used the term "Shut Door" as a "code word" for what happened in heaven on October 22, 1844 (509). He also states that although health reform had been discussed here and there in Adventism prior to the 1863 vision, it had not been adopted as a whole (288-89), whereas Numbers asserts that by "1863 Seventh-day Adventists were already in possession of the main outlines of the health reform message" (80-81). Although both of these statements are probably technically correct, Douglass in contrast to Numbers phrases his interpretation in such a way as to minimize Adventist knowledge of health reform prior to 1863 and therefore its significance for the content of her pivotal vision of that year.

Other books move in a similar direction in dealing with the issues that Numbers and others have raised. Although not directly addressing Ellen White, George Rice's *Luke, A Plagiarist?* responded to the debate by arguing that the book of Luke both borrowed and changed material from other sources. In place of the standard "prophetic model" of inspiration, which emphasized revelatory experience, Rice therefore offered a second "Lucan model" that incorporated sources and authorial perspective. He believed that such a model would enable the Church to address more successfully questions relating to Ellen White's inspiration.¹¹ Juan Carlos Viera acknowledged that Ellen White used other's writings in the *Great Controversy*, but argued that she neither broke literary property laws nor cited many quotations word for word.¹² George Knight, in providing guidelines in his book *Reading Ellen White*, entitled one of his chapters, "Realize



That Inspiration Is Not Infallible, Inerrant, or Verbal.”¹³

It seems that after the passage of twenty-five years no substantive evidence in *Prophetess of Health* has been controverted. Indeed, the Church seems to have accepted most of Numbers's specific arguments regarding Ellen White's errors, borrowing, and inconsistency in following her own advice. Also, Numbers's argument that Ellen White was largely a child of her times has been at least recognized, if not accepted. My own the *World of Ellen G. White*, prepared at the request of Review and Herald Publishing Association, and George Knight's *Ellen White's World* both assume that she can only be understood within her social context even if those books do not present her as a product of that environment.¹⁴ On the other hand, Numbers's "methodological naturalism" has been implicitly rejected, for most of the books on Ellen White discussed above are thoroughly supernaturalist in approach. Although Adventist historians generally avoid supernatural explanations when writing about other subjects, we still await a scholarly biography of Ellen White written according to the standard canons of historical scholarship.

In the process of the debate over Ellen White, to which Numbers contributed perhaps the crucial element, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has adopted a broader understanding of inspiration with regard to both her and the Bible. But has this broadened theory, which accepts such elements as fallibility and borrowing from other sources, had any impact on the actual faith and practice of the Church? With regard to Ellen White, has this deeper understanding of the human dimension of inspiration changed the way we use her writings?

For Ronald L. Numbers, the publication of *Prophetess of Health* marked a major step forward in what has become a stellar career. Author of many books, several of which incorporate elements of Adventist history, president of both the History of Science Society and the Society of Church History, among other achievements, Numbers has become one of America's premier historians. For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the results of his research have been more ambiguous. Much of what Numbers said in 1976 has been reluctantly accepted, but whether that acceptance is anything more than theoretical is still to be determined.

Notes and References

1. Gary Land, "Faith, History and Ellen White," *Spectrum* 9.2 (Mar. 1978): 50-55.

2. T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain

View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1955).

3. Herold Weiss and Roy Branson, "Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," *Spectrum* 2.4 (autumn 1970), 30-33; W. Paul Bradley, "Ellen G. White and Her Writings," *Spectrum* 3.2 (spring 1971): 43-64.

4. William S. Peterson, "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution," *Spectrum* 2.4 (autumn 1970): 57-69.

5. "Prophet or Plagiarist?" *Time*, Aug. 2, 1976, 43.

6. Brief surveys of the debate over Ellen White can be found in Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America: A History* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 219-23; rev. ed. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1998), 180-83; and Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Lightbearers: A History of the Seventh-day to the Remnant Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 632-38. Jonathan M. Butler has provided an extensive behind-the-scenes account of the personal and institutional turmoil over Numbers's book in his "Introduction: The Historian as Heretic," in *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform*, rev. ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), xxv-lxxviii.

7. In the original edition of *Prophetess of Health*, Numbers avoided psychological analysis of Ellen G. White. In the revised edition, however, he and clinical psychologist Janet S. Numbers coauthored an afterword entitled, "Ellen White on the Mind and the Mind of Ellen White," and added an appendix, "Physical and Psychological Experiences of Ellen G. White: Related in Her Own Words" (202-63).

8. Walter T. Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, Calif.: M & R Publications, 1982).

9. Fred Veltman, *Full Report of the Life of Christ Research Project*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1988). Schwarz and Greenleaf state that Veltman's findings "corroborated much of what McAdams [who in a 1977 paper had demonstrated that "Ellen White's use of sources beyond her visions far exceeded general understanding"] had discovered, and like McAdam's statement, his report remained unpublished." *Lightbearers*, 632, 636.

10. See for example, White's treatment of health reform in *Ellen G. White: The Progressive Years*, vol. 2 (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1986), 73-98, 176-204. Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998).

11. George E. Rice, *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1983).

12. Juan Carlos Viera, *The Voice of the Spirit: How God Has Led His People Through the Gift of Prophecy* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998), 64, 86.

13. George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1997), 105.

14. Gary Land, ed., *The World of Ellen G. White* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1987); George R. Knight, *Ellen White's World: A Fascinating Look at the Times in which She Lived* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1998).

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