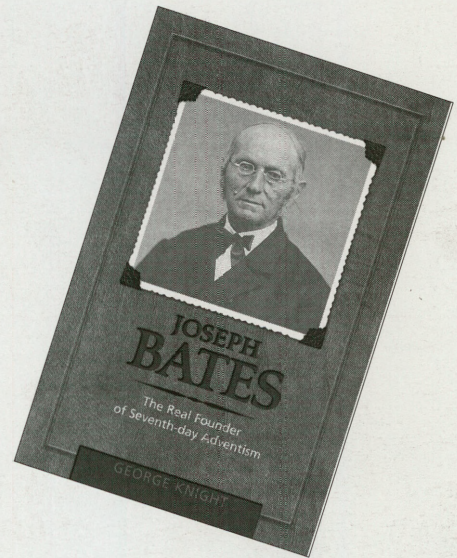


# Early Adventism's Leon Trotsky

By Benjamin McArthur

A Review of George Knight,  
*Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism*  
(Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2004).



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What's the news, Captain Bates?" James Madison Monroe Hall famously asked in 1846. "The seventh day is the Sabbath," replied Joseph Bates. The exchange summed up the greatest contribution of Bates to our early church: infusing Sabbatarianism into the apocalypticism of Millerism. The very name of our movement, Seventh-day Adventism, suggests the centrality of these two propositions.

Still, George Knight's title, *Joseph Bates: the Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism*, hints at marketing department hyperbole. James White, the great organizer, and Ellen Harmon White, the prophetic confirmer of doctrine, were fully as necessary to the movement's early success. But Knight should be granted his point. In Adventist historical memory, Bates's name occupies a distant third place to the two Whites. Knight will have served a useful purpose if he can restore Bates to an equal station.

Bates is generally remembered for his seafaring background, a profession unusual in the ranks of antebellum religious and social reformers. His adventures on the

high seas—in particular his experience of being impressed into the British navy and subsequent imprisoned in bleak Dartmoor Prison—make for vivid reading. These tales, though briefly recounted, are not a focus of Knight's study. If one desires a vivid narrative retelling of Bates's life one must turn to Godfrey Anderson's 1972 volume, *Outrider of the Apocalypse: Life and Times of Joseph Bates*. Anderson did pioneering work on Bates's life and produced work that remains the best general account of the Adventist pioneer.

A reader needn't stop there. Joseph Bates himself produced an autobiography published in 1868, which is primarily devot-

ed to his seagoing adventures. His vivid stories of life in the British navy and experiences in South America is, overall, a primary source worthy of broad circulation among scholars and general readers with an interest in nineteenth-century seafaring history. (Making this easier is a 2004 reprint of his *Autobiography*, with a foreword by Gary Land, by Andrews University Press, part of the Adventist Classic Library.)

George Knight's interests, however, are less with adventure than influence. *Joseph Bates* is a work less polished than Knight's *Millennial Fever: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (2000) or *From 1888 to Apostasy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (1987), but it is one that repays careful reading. An historian on the prowl for new evidence, Knight utilizes recently uncovered sources, such as a cache of Bates letters. He details the multiple contributions Bates made to Adventism and provokes (at least in this reader) reflections on how the institutional face of Adventism is indeed the extended shadow of its founders.

And what were Bates's contributions? First and foremost, he was among the first Millerites to embrace the Sabbath, having read Thomas Preble's tract on the subject and then traveled to New Hampshire to meet with the clutch of early Millerite Sabbathkeepers there. Bates became the seventh-day's greatest advocate among the Disappointed. He brought the message to the soon-to-be-married Ellen Harmon and James White.

Furthermore, Bates invested the Sabbath doctrine with prophetic significance. The Sabbath was the test that would distinguish the remnant; it was implicit, thought Bates, in the Three Angels' Message. Bates, anointed by Knight as Sabbatarian Adventism's first theologian, also was its first historian in the sense of placing the little Adventist band in the great flow of prophetic history.

Bates was a tireless missionary. Through New England and New York he carried the Sabbath advent message; then in the 1850s his itinerancies took him to Michigan, where he effectively established the movement in what would become the keystone state of Adventism.

Finally, he was Adventism's first health reformer. He eschewed alcohol and tobacco as a young man, and meat and other rich foods shortly before 1844. Ellen White and other church notables caught up with him in the mid-1860s, after illness began decimating leadership. After White's early health reform visions of 1863 and 1865, Bates, who had previously kept his Spartan health regimen a private matter, felt freed to actively propagate the message of good living.

In *Joseph Bates*, George Knight reminds us again that our church doctrines did not spring fully formed from the brow of Ellen White. They emerged through prayer, study, and struggle. Knockdown theological battles with the Albany conference faction of Millerites took on the air of Trotskyite-Stalinist battles over minutia of communist doctrine. In this reading, Bates is Trotsky. He had the same unbending devotion to truth as he understood it, the same readiness to take on all comers (even willing in print to attack Miller himself).

This contentiousness extended to fellow Sabbatarian Adventists. When James White appeared insufficiently committed to an unsullied evangelism (White's desire to devote previous resources to founding *Present Truth* was evidence of backsliding), Bates almost broke with him, petulantly refusing for months to contribute a word to the journal. The struggles between the two men ultimately concerned leadership of the emerging movement. In this agon, the younger man, aided by a charismatic spouse, was destined to win. But unlike Trotsky, Bates was not banished to nether regions; indeed, it was a mark of his and White's Christian spirit and underlying comradeship that tensions would be surmounted, and the two men together continued shaping the young church well into the 1860s.

Joseph Bates's influence on Seventh-day Adventism was not merely theological or organizational. He contributed, less happily, to the strain of legalism that long infected the Church. Bates came by such a trait temperamentally. It was apparent in the ban on drink and swearing and imposed Sunday observance on his ship crews. It later surfaced in his attitude regarding Sabbath keeping. Knight acknowledges that Bates had an imperfect grasp of salvation by grace, preferring, it would seem, a behavioristic criterion for salvation. One must wonder whether Bates's failure to persuade any of his four surviving children to embrace Adventism had its cause in a sometimes unattractive version of the Adventist gospel.

But such should not be the last word on Joseph Bates. A man who poured the considerable savings of his seafaring career into his mission (living the last half of his life in near penury) and whose every sentient moment seemed devoted to advancing the gospel is one to admire. And George Knight, who has explored so many vital corners of early Adventism, is to be thanked for reminding us of our debt to the intrepid sea captain.

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