

Discussed: Maureen, Graham, Malcolm, Lawrence, Mervyn, Deirdre, the Peter Stories, Cecil B. DeMille, maroon Humber, *Queen Mary*, gardener's quarters, Stanford University, English truffles, theology, family dinners, stories

On Uncle Arthur's Knee

By Lynn Neumann McDowell

If you grew up Adventist in the 1950s or 1960s—and even later—there's an excellent chance that your knowledge of biblical stories is based not on a black book or even a set of red books, but on ten volumes of child-friendly short chapters with spectacular full-color paintings on every spread. The first image that comes to your mind when someone mentions Queen Esther is that of a curvaceous redhead in an off-the-shoulder gold lamé gown with a dramatic fringe. Abraham has a black and yellow robe that traveled well, from his call in Ur, through his accumulation of great wealth in Egypt, and still looks great on Mount Moriah, where he is dramatically poised to plunge a knife into the body of his long-awaited son.

For *The Bible Story* alone, never mind his *Bedtime Stories*, Arthur Maxwell may well rival Ellen White as the most influential author in Adventism. The mythic proportions attained by the "Uncle Arthur" persona are perhaps best measured by the flow of childish letters that poured into the Maxwell family mailbox. During his lifetime in America, there wasn't a mail delivery to the Maxwell household that didn't include at least one letter from a child, usually sharing a personal experience that was potential fodder for the *Bedtime Stories*. The



This photograph of Uncle Arthur with children was taken in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

Uncle Arthur's
BEDTIME STORIES



The cover for the 1941 edition of *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*, volume 4, published by *Review and Herald*. *Review and Herald* published fifteen volumes of *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*. Pacific Press published twenty more.

flow continued for years, even after Arthur passed away in 1970, with his son Lawrence continuing his father's practice of responding to each missive.

As a child, I, too, had wanted to write to Uncle Arthur, but my mother, who would have had to serve as scribe, never got around to getting his address. So instead, I imagined myself sitting on Uncle Arthur's knee. I'd never seen his picture and I attributed no physical face to him even in my imagination. It was more an aura I imagined. I knew from the way he wrote that he

he edited the *Junior Guide*, and later the *Primary Treasure* and *Our Little Friend*; he compiled *The Pathfinder Field Guide*, and eventually became the second Maxwell to edit the *Signs of the Times*.

Mervyn, according to Malcom, was "the most natural writer of the bunch." Mervyn authored several books, including *Tell It to the World, God Cares*, and *Man What a God!* Mervyn became head of the Department of Church History at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews Univer-

When Cecil B. DeMille died Dad [Arthur] was invited to the reading of the will....

really understood kids, and so I adopted him as my uncle, just as I had some of my parents' friends.

Imagine my delight when I discovered, upon arriving at Pacific Union College in 2001, that the man who as academic dean at Walla Walla College gave me my diploma actually had sat on Uncle Arthur's knee. In fact, Malcolm Maxwell—who became the longest serving president of PUC—was the keeper of Uncle Arthur's legacy in more ways than one.

Of course, other of Uncle Arthur's children carried with them the imprint of his breadth and brilliance. Graham, the eldest son, who as an author and professor at PUC and Loma Linda School of Medicine, influenced the spiritual life of more physicians and laypeople generally than any other pastor, carried his father's love of theology into dimensions that packed churches as well as classrooms. Like his father, Graham made Adventist publishers smile with brisk sales from his books (*Can God be Trusted?* is a modern Adventist classic).

Maureen, the eldest daughter and the firstborn, inherited the focus and pioneering spirit that led her to start the graduate nursing program at Loma Linda and write a book on nursing. For years, she sat on the board of the National League of Nursing, the governing body of the profession, and was the first Adventist nurse to earn a doctoral degree and apply it to nursing.

The twins, Lawrence and Mervyn, took up the editorial torch that first brought Arthur and his wife Rachel (nee Joyce) along with their five children from England to Mountain View, California, where Arthur became editor of the *Signs of the Times* in 1936. Lawrence, like his father, was to be a major influence in Adventist children's literature. For eighteen years,

and the first editor of *Adventist Affirm*, which Lawrence also edited after Mervyn's passing.

Then there was the "second family," which comprised Malcolm, born in England nine years after the twins, and adopted-in-America baby Deirdre, Malcolm's constant companion and co-star of the "Kenny's Comfort" episode in *The Bedtime Stories*. The array of classic literature in the considerable family library was a source of much joy and formative in Deirdre's choice of library science along with home economics as her minor and major at PUC.

But it was Malcolm who perhaps more than the others benefited from the seasoning that accompanied his father into later life and the luxury of a bit more time with his family. It was Malcolm who helped his father build a house on Vancouver Island, who collaborated on improvement projects at home, and who had his own private series of bedtime stories—the Peter Stories, about a young inventor whose workshop bore an uncanny resemblance to the Maxwell garage. Spun in Technicolor at Malcolm's bedside until Rachel shooed Arthur away, the Peter Stories were for Malcolm's ears only, never committed to paper and thus they remain forever a gift passed between the master storyteller and his youngest son alone.

To no one's great surprise, Arthur chose Malcolm—and in the old understanding of married team work, Malcolm's highly efficient and organized wife, Eileen—to be the custodian of his 112 books and other literary works, with their attendant intellectual property rights.¹

I had to know more. So I put on my writer's cap and gave Malcolm a call.

A Tale of Two Continents

It's hard to say whether the Adventist Arthurian legend begins in England or at the Golden Gate Bridge.² Shortly after their cross-country road trip from Battle Creek to Mountain View, the Maxwell family Buick was the first civilian vehicle to traverse the new bridge on opening day. It was the kind of cocktail party anecdote—one of many from Arthur's life—that no doubt made the proudly Scottish Arthur welcome in places that other church employees would never see, like the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, and prayer meetings in the homes of various Hollywood stars.

"When Cecil B. DeMille died," recalls Malcolm, "Dad was invited to the reading of the will because DeMille asked that he be there. [In the will], he thanks Dad for the insights he gave in his writings, and how this made a difference in his life personally and in his films, particularly *The Ten Commandments*." Arthur also received a red leather-bound copy of the script that has the historical basis for each scene and line of the movie noted in it—a sort of film script "dissertation" honoring Arthur's contribution.

"Dad had a knack," says Malcolm. "I sit down on a plane and end up with a crying baby beside me; he'd sit down and he'd have the treasurer of the United States sitting beside him. That kind of thing happened to him over and over again."

Malcolm's charming and self-effacing modesty appear to have come mostly from his mother. Recalling another car-related episode in his father's life, Malcolm spoke tongue-in-cheek about the dash and individuality that were always just below the surface of Arthur's British correctness.

His father was one of the first church employees in Great Britain to own a car. If there was a buzz when Arthur first turned up in his Austin, there was a roar when he showed up in his second car—a maroon Humber with inlaid door handles. "Not being particularly bashful," smiles Malcolm, "he caused quite a stir." The "stir" required Arthur to park two blocks from the churches he visited, but it didn't deter him from keeping the trendy driving machine.

It was this kind of pluck and individuality that distinguished Arthur from other young men who manured the lawns of Stanborough Press, where Rachel Joyce was chief copy editor. "Dad rose through the ranks at the press," Malcolm remarks. "When he eventually got



The wedding photo of Rachel and Arthur Maxwell in Watford, England, May 3, 1917.

to the point of reading copy to the attractive red-headed editor, Dad used to say that the only way to get any further was to marry her and get her out of the way."

It was to be a literary partnership as well as a lifelong friendship. Rachel actually published her writing in *The Present Truth*, the British church's periodical, before Arthur began his publishing career, and she published in the genre that was to become his legacy: children's stories. While in America, Arthur wrote two books a year at home in addition to editing full-time at the *Signs*. He would frequently call down from his upstairs study, "How do you spell—?" and Rachel would answer from the kitchen.

Publishing was Arthur's inevitable calling. At the time of his mother's conversion to Adventism, however, the fifteen-year-old from Brighton had set his course for the sea, and he had no use for the Adventist clergyman who had diverted his mother from the true faith of the Church of England. When the pastor came to visit the home, Arthur refused to meet him and escaped through his bedroom window, shinnying down



the drain pipe rather than shake the man's hand.

But the pastor prevailed. For educational reasons, Arthur's mother instigated the family move to Stanborough Park/Newbold College. While the family was unpacking, they discovered that an evangelistic meeting was underway, so they left Arthur, who refused to join them, with instructions that he finish unpacking. When they returned, Arthur was in a sailor's hammock, which he'd strung up among the still-packed boxes, a kind of one-man sit-in protest to his mother's choices.

But the family stayed and Arthur needed a job. Reluctantly, the staunch young Church of England supporter became a colporteur, selling Adventist books in the Outer Hebrides. Feeling very much like a fish out of water—or maybe more like Jonah on his way to Nineveh after the whale—Arthur prayed as he lugged his bag of books up the path to a remote lighthouse, "Lord, if you want me to be a colporteur, please let the lighthouse keeper be nice to me." The lighthouse keeper was as happy to see another human being as the lonely sixteen-year old was to be out of the wind. From the generous proceeds of that sale, Arthur purchased a green "purse" (which the family still has), put



Deirdre and Malcolm Maxwell with Sooty the dog, taken at their Los Altos home.

a gold sovereign inside, and sent it along with a letter telling the story to his mother.

It was the beginning of a series of events that led to Arthur's conversion to Adventism and publishing. Arthur got acquainted with his future father-in-law, who was in charge of literature evangelism for the British Isles.³ Arthur got his first job at Stanborough Publishing fertilizing lawns, and thus began his brilliant career.

Having married his job competitor, Arthur was chief editor and manager of the press when he received the invitation to edit the *Signs of the Times*, the touchstone of Adventist publishing. And the rest is "American" history.

One might think that the brash young man who could sell books he didn't even believe in would have no second thoughts about his decision to relocate in America, but the heaviness of family responsibility no doubt weighed upon him as they crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary*, with two-and-a-half-year old Malcolm shouting at the waves as they pounded the deck, "Stop that noise!"

Where was he taking his five children? Graham was sixteen at the time, a brilliant pianist who'd already matriculated in music in the English system, and had the opportunity to go pro as a cricket player. And what about education? Arthur had braved the wrath of local parishioners when he pulled his children out of the Adventist church school that he helped establish because the education was, in his opinion, quite standard. When he'd applied for a visa, it was denied because, the letter said, "we have sufficient people on the dole already in the United States."

Arthur had had to prove that he was going to be paid what every Seventh-day Adventist pastor was paid (some things never change). He'd sold the jewels of his aunt and mother to build the Watford Town Church and so had no major assets but Glencairn, the home he'd designed and built in Stanborough Park. And his house wasn't selling.

For weeks, Arthur looked at property in the Mountain View and Los Altos area, all of it too expensive or small. With little expectation, Arthur followed up on a suggestion to look at the Atwood estate, the summer home of a C&H Sugar executive. It was grand, and included among its amenities a greenhouse, and maid and gardener's quarters, with grounds big enough to keep his children busy. To Arthur, it was a pipe dream, and he cringed at the price: forty-seven hundred dollars.

Arthur got back in the car and drove home. On arrival, he found a letter from his solicitor back in England. Glencairn had just sold for forty-seven hundred dollars. "Dad took that as an indication," says Malcolm, "that it was OK to bring the family out to the colonies." But Arthur steadfastly refused to buy any power equipment to maintain the vast grounds until Malcolm went to college.

Life with Arthur in America

"Dad was a workhorse right until he went into the hospital," recalls Malcolm; often he was gone for six weeks at a time on *Signs* campaigns. "Dad preferred a brass band [to classical music], but we all took piano lessons. He was lots of fun, always into things."

In the evening, the family gathered for reading. Sometimes there would be drafts of *Bedtime Stories*, but more often there were stories from the *Atlantic Monthly* or books of history read aloud by Rachel.⁴ The readings would spark questions, and the young Malcolm absorbed the perspectives of his parents, and when they were home, his older siblings, all of whom were well-read and precise about detail.⁵

It was at these evening readings, with Arthur flopped on the sofa and kids scattered on the floor, that Malcolm's broad education began. Arthur was never one to rely on just one source and ignore other perspectives. With the advent of World War II, he went out and bought a shortwave radio so the family could get information about the war from more than one source (Arthur was particularly fond of the BBC).

And while Arthur embraced the good life in America—he had season's tickets to lectures and theater at Stanford University—there was always a little bit of England at home.⁶ There were regularly scheduled holidays at the seaside; Arthur never did get the salt out of his veins. He loved being on a boat, and Rachel would readily drop her book for a stroll down the boardwalk or to help build a sandcastle.

Friday night meant English china and English truffles. "The whole Christmas Sequence," as Malcolm terms it, was a blend of what they liked best in the English and U.S. traditions: plum pudding that required each family member to give fifty stirs; a Father Christmas/Santa suit that Arthur donned and that Malcolm still uses.



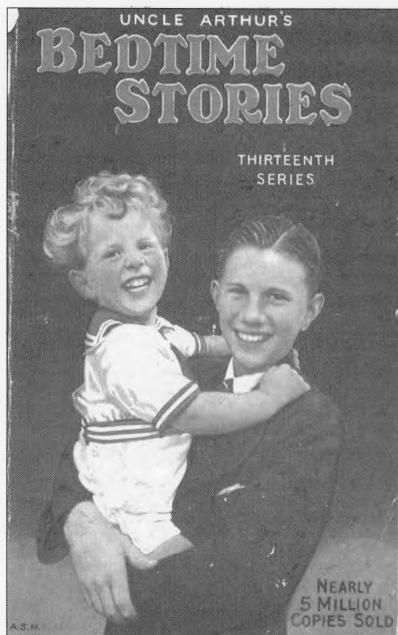
Arthur Maxwell with children in a photo taken at the 1950 General Conference in San Francisco and used in volume 5 of the *Bedtime Stories*. His children's books were translated into twenty-nine languages.

Theology: An Open Conversation

"Mealtimes were always conversation times," remembers Malcolm. "They [my parents] were always open to inquiry. Any question was OK. Never can I imagine Mother saying, 'You know, Malcolm, that's not appropriate. That's not something we delve into.' She was a voluminous reader herself. Dad was a reader, but Mother even more so." In a house where theology was in the air, it's no wonder that three of the boys went on to study theology at the best graduate schools of the day—Graham and Mervyn at the University of Chicago, and Malcolm at Drew University, near New York.⁷

Not that these forays were always sanctioned by Arthur's colleagues. When PUC offered to pay young Graham's way through any graduate school he chose, "the Brethren" were concerned about his choice of Chicago and came to remonstrate with Arthur. Arthur listened first patiently, then not so patiently to their concerns that Chicago would undermine Graham's confidence in Adventism. "After being brought up a Seventh-





This 1936 photograph of Graham and Malcolm was used in the British edition of the *Bedtime Stories*, volume 13.

ly divided them. But always they would come together as a family. And as the boys and Dierdre married and the table grew longer at family dinners, Arthur, who hated to be left out of a good theological debate, would call out from the head of the table to the end, where his sons would invariably be exchanging theological volleys, “No theology until after dinner!”

“That’s a healthy environment,” observes Malcolm. “We [children] were given latitude to be ourselves, and you really have six individuals... We don’t think that one has to be in agreement in order to have a good relationship, either in the family or in the church.”⁸

How can the range of theological views in the brothers—extremely conservative to more groundbreaking—be explained? “For whatever reason, some people are more inclined to think philosophically,” says Malcolm.⁹ “I think Graham and I kind of think philosophically. Mervyn and Lawrence were more, what—fact-based, perhaps... Because of the different backgrounds and experience [they attended PUC at different times, for example], different ways of looking at things and processing data—yes, we are different. But,” reflects Malcolm, “we had and still have great times together.”

The memory of an egg toss on the front lawn of Mervyn’s Andrews University home—to see how far they could toss them before they broke—lights up Malcolm’s countenance; he chuckles at having found a smelly bird’s nest when he helped Lawrence move

day Adventist and all these years of attending church and young people’s meetings and Sabbath School,” Arthur retorted in exasperation, “if there’s something he doesn’t know about Adventism, he might as well learn it now and be done with it.”

That was to become the family position on theological inquiry. Sometimes it united them, sometimes it temporarily

(Lawrence wanted to dissect it to see how many trips the bird made in its construction).

We’re nearing the end of our conversation—a conversation of memories about “Uncle Arthur,” a man who created memories for millions of children, whether they lived in his house or were connected to him only by words on a page. That’s a kind of family, too.

“I think it’s impossible to understand the dynamics of the family without [stories],” says Malcolm as I rise to leave. “Because basically, a family is a series of anecdotes.

“They’re memories,” explains Malcolm. There’s a slight pause. “Without memories, you have no bonds.”

Notes and References

1. Along with rights come responsibility: Malcolm and Eileen poured over more than five thousand pages of editorial proofs when *The Bible Story* was updated in the 1970s.
2. Arthur was born in London on January 14, 1896, and died in Mountain View, California, on November 13, 1970.
3. Samuel Joyce, of Irish extraction, went into publishing rather than pubs, even though his mother’s family owned the Rose and Crown Pubs of Great Britain.
4. Arthur and Rachel expected—yea, required—their children to have private devotionals during the week; family worship was reserved for Friday and Saturday evenings.
5. Malcolm is especially thankful for his father’s attention to acronyms. Arthur’s youngest son was almost named Donald Alwin until Arthur decided that sending the lad through life as “the DAM Maxwell kid” was a bad idea.
6. For many years, the Maxwells felt strong ties to the land of their birth. Lawrence remembers that his father “had to fight to get furlough” back to England after working at Mountain View for the number of years customarily required of missionaries.
7. Lawrence began work on a Ph.D. in history at the University of Maryland, but became absorbed in his editing work.
8. When I contacted Lawrence, who for a time edited *Adventist Affirm*, to get his recollections, he was at first cautious about speaking to a *Spectrum* writer, noting “*Spectrum* hasn’t always been a friend of the Church, you know.” He was, however, quite willing to chat upon being assured that it was OK with Malcolm—an indication of the mutual respect and solidarity they share.
9. Malcolm recalls that the overriding goal of his father in writing *The Bible Story* was to illuminate for children the loving character of God that Arthur saw revealed in The Great Controversy—a theme Graham has explored in several venues.

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