

Point of the Spear: Adventist Liberalism and the Study of Ellen White in the 1970s | BY BENJAMIN MCARTHUR

Has any arena of Adventist scholarship in the past forty years been more consequential—or more controversial—than the study of Ellen White’s use of literary sources? If acceptance of her literary borrowing is now a commonplace, it is only so because of some excellent research accomplished by Adventist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s. Their conclusions need no retelling here. Suffice it to say, we have learned that inspiration is more complex and more subject to human elements than our naive, earlier view held.¹

We are now more than a quarter century past the appearance of Ronald Numbers’s *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform* (1976) and Walter Rea’s *The White Lie* (1982), the two most controversial publications on her work.² My interest here is with an aspect of the story not previously told: the inception of Ellen White research at Andrews University and the White Estate’s response to it. This article focuses on the work of a young historian at Andrews, Donald R. McAdams (pictured above). Because he never published his research, his contributions, though widely discussed in academic circles, were less familiar to the broader Adventist public than the writings of Numbers or Rea. But McAdams’s work was an influential part of the outpouring of White scholarship in the 1970s and beyond.

On one level, my account may seem little more than a

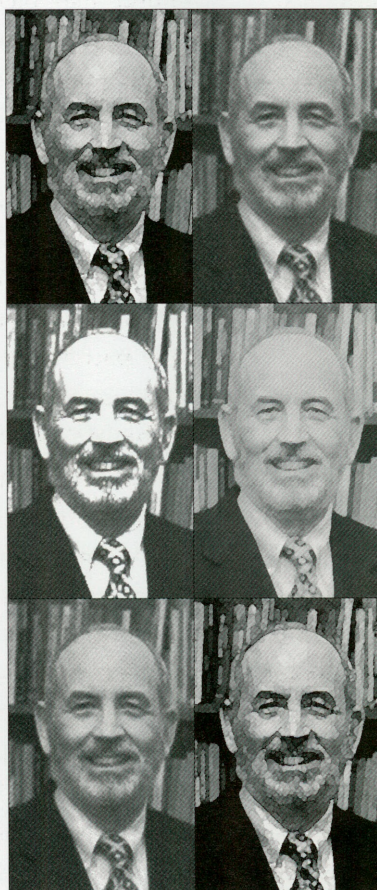
revisit of musty archives and tireless redaction criticism. But more was at work here. The story begins at a point in Adventist higher education when the promise of a

scholarship wedded to the service of the church appeared bright. The honeymoon was fleeting. It soon became apparent that a rigorous historical self-scrutiny would confront a religious tradition fearful of its conclusions.

When Donald McAdams graduated from Columbia Union College in 1963, he head-

ed south to Durham, North Carolina, to study British history at Duke University. Son of the associate publishing director at the General Conference, McAdams envisioned a career for himself within Adventist education. He didn’t imagine undertaking a groundbreaking study of his church’s prophetess, certainly not as he attended the evangelistic effort of Archer Livengood at the Durham church. But when the conference evangelist began reciting facts from the French Revolution, McAdams, then taking a course

in the subject, spotted inaccuracies. Diplomatically pointing these out after the sermon, he was invited to Livengood’s trailer, where the veteran preacher pulled off the shelf a well-worn copy of *Great Controversy* and confidently displayed the evidence for his statements. For the moment, McAdams was trumped. But he got his first hint that problems existed in our church’s “canon” and filed away a resolve to give the matter study.³



Completing his Ph.D., McAdams joined the Andrews University History Department in 1967. He arrived at an opportune moment, when, to paraphrase Wordsworth, Seventh-day Adventism was "seeming born again." North American Adventism in the 1950s and 1960s exuded self-confidence: growing in numbers, theologically unified, and still relatively untroubled by challenges of ethnic pluralism. The church was happy to accept the invitation of Donald Barnhouse to join the fraternity of Evangelicals. Eschatological beliefs notwithstanding, Adventist leaders could not help but share with other Americans the prevalent post-World War II belief in social progress and the ability of higher education to lead the way. Seventh-day Adventism felt poised to attain cultural respect such as it had never known.

Andrews University (1960) and Loma Linda University (1961) were the institutional expressions of this confidence. The desire for graduate education, in particular to prepare teachers and clergy, was the driving force behind the establishment of Andrews. With the arrival of Richard Hammill as president in 1963, the young university began making quick strides. Hammill, himself trained in Old Testament studies at the University of Chicago, had a vision of an Adventist higher education that included rigorous scholarship. Excellence would require a purposeful recruitment of faculty talent, a task Hammill pursued more energetically than previously seen in Adventist higher education. Library enhancements and the pursuit of professional accreditation for various departments followed. Andrews, though not a Berkeley or Cornell University, seemed on its way to embodying an Adventist version of the modern liberal university.⁴

Another indication of the church's newfound confidence in scholarship was the establishment of the Geoscience Research Institute (GRI), modestly begun in 1958, then expanded in the 1960s. Church leaders believed that the first-rate team of biologists, paleontologists, and geologists assembled at Andrews could substantiate young-earth creationism. Alas, the church's best and brightest, sporting advanced degrees from Harvard, California, Wisconsin, and Princeton, came to heterodox conclusions. After a geology field tour to the Rockies in 1968, where General Conference president Robert H. Pierson was exposed to the scientific problems of the young-earth theory, he issued a ukase stipulating that the GRI was to be concerned with apologetics, not problems. Subsequently, the

late 1960s witnessed a shaking within GRI, which would eventuate in new leadership and a move to Loma Linda.⁵

Another manifestation of Adventism's brief fling with liberalism—and one with a direct impact on Ellen White scholarship—came in an unlikely place: the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Like the GRI, the seminary became home to some talented and probing scholars in the 1960s. New Testament faculty, in particular, pushed the envelope in their presentation to students of contemporary biblical criticism. And the newly created Department of Christian Ethics, headed by Roy Branson, promoted a brand of social ethics that challenged students' conservative assumptions. A small minority of seminary students, themselves caught up in the zeitgeist of the sixties, found the atmosphere exhilarating and career altering. But many seminarians found the curriculum too challenging, both academically and theologically. When complaints mounted and General Conference leadership intervened, there followed the most pointed shuffling of personnel in the seminary's history: reassignments, resignations, and in at least one case, outright release.⁶

Even though theological backlash in the seminary was imminent by the time McAdams arrived in Berrien Springs, Andrews remained a place of amazing intellectual ferment—at least by the standards of normally quiescent Adventist campuses. The activism included a threatened nuclear option by an aroused cabal of Andrews faculty. Upset by the seminary housecleaning, they made noises about establishing a chapter of the aggressive American Association of University Professors. Andrews administrators would not, of course, entertain any thought of allowing a labor advocacy group on campus and quickly squelched the movement.⁷

But the atmosphere was usually more congenial than confrontational. The intellectual excitement of the place was born witness by many faculty who were there. Even a callow freshman such as myself, arriving on campus in 1969, could sense the energy. The "Andrews Project," so to speak, was confidently expressed by Donald McAdams in a centennial-year chapel talk in early 1974, seeking to persuade students of the special task of their time and place. "Andrews," McAdams insisted, "not the General Conference in Washington, Andrews is the spearpoint of change in the Adventist church."⁸

In the early 1970s, the nature of Ellen White's inspiration became a frequent target of the spear. This was so not

only because of McAdams's experience at Duke but also because of the frustration of some seminary professors who were confronted by student complaints that their biblical interpretations occasionally diverged from Ellen White's. In an attempt to defuse this line of argument, Roy Branson and Harold Weiss began to ask if Ellen White's writings might be usefully contextualized, as was done in biblical scholarship. Such a project would be difficult in the seminary. It was better left to the humanities departments, where the stakes appeared less high. It turned out not to be McAdams but his colleague across the hall in the English Department, William Peterson, who in the same issue of *Spectrum* as Branson and Weiss's essay undertook the first study of *Great Controversy* sources.⁹

Peterson, a 1961 Walla Walla graduate, began teaching at Andrews in 1962 with only a master's degree. After two years, he took a leave for graduate study at Northwestern University. He returned in 1966 with doctorate in hand and a growing sense of unease. The son of Adventist converts in the Pacific Northwest, Peterson grew up as an avid reader of White's books and a loyal, rather conservative Adventist. But a skeptical disposition nurtured at Northwestern and the intellectual ferment at Andrews opened his eyes to a troubling tendency in the church to use her writings as conversation stoppers. Thus, when discussions with McAdams turned to Ellen White (as they frequently did), Peterson found intriguing his observations about historical problems with *Great Controversy*. A visit to James White Library to examine her quoted sources on the French Revolution was eye-opening. After McAdams assured him that he didn't have time to pursue the research just then, Peterson determined to do so himself.¹⁰

The result was "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution." It was a short essay that threw a powerful punch. Peterson argued that the chapter depended on sources that were hopelessly biased in favor of Protestantism. Furthermore, he concluded that White used them carelessly and in a few cases with clear distortion. In sum, Peterson indicted the historical dependability of at least this portion of *Great Controversy*. Moreover, his pointed words lacked the usual caution employed in discussing Ellen White, which magnified the controversy. Over the next several issues of *Spectrum*, a spokesman for the White Estate and a young seminarian took Peterson to task, and he responded with increased bitterness.¹¹

The ongoing published exchanges remind us that *Spectrum* magazine was birthed alongside the scholarly scrutiny of Ellen White. The Association of Adventist Forums and its journal sought to create through conversation and print a true Adventist intellectual community. Although the association would come to be stereotyped as the quintessential left wing of the church, it should be recalled that in its early years *Spectrum* published such mainstream church figures as Raoul Dederen, Richard Hammill, Edward Hopenstall, and Arthur White.

William Peterson's foray into Ellen White studies began and ended with his article and response to critics. Indeed, his association with Adventist education ended soon after. Having published one scholarly book and with another in the pipeline, he possessed credentials that made him an attractive figure in the booming academic market of the early 1970s. Furthermore, the controversy surrounding his *Spectrum* article made him, by his own account, an outcast on the Andrews campus. Some colleagues preferred not to be seen with him. Thus, drawn by scholarly ambition and driven by disillusionment, Peterson decamped for the University of Maryland in 1971, where he enjoyed a productive career in its English Department until retirement in 2004.¹²

But Donald McAdams was ready to continue what Peterson had begun. While preparing for a Sabbath afternoon student book club discussion of A. G. Dickens's recent study, the *English Reformation*, McAdams made a serendipitous find. Dickens, against prevailing scholarly fashion, argued for a religious rather than political interpretation of the English Reformation. Might Ellen White have been ahead of her time with her similar understanding? Intrigued, McAdams undertook an examination of *Great Controversy's* chapter fourteen, which dealt with that event. He looked at only the first five pages of the chapter, but from that short excerpt he anticipated most of the findings of his more extensive later research. The overwhelming quantity of White's words, for example, were plucked directly from Protestant historian D'Aubigné (with a few bows to John Foxe). The structure of her history followed theirs almost completely, and—not surprisingly—she understood the movement as purely a religious one.

What did McAdams conclude about all this? That Mrs.

White's history was essentially a condensation of other historians. He concluded that these historians, as Peterson had already established, were overwhelmingly anti-Catholic, which influenced her to ignore the not-uncommon Protestant persecution of Catholics. He also concluded that, notwithstanding the above problems, *Great Controversy* may still be considered an inspired work. Her inspiration, asserts McAdams, lies not in the history she summarizes but in the religious meaning she imparts to it, the contest between God and Satan. The Holy Spirit provided her the "big picture" rather than particular facts. If there had been disillusionment over the fact of her extensive literary borrowing, McAdams concluded in an accompanying paper, it was because the church failed to take her introductory disclaimer at face value.¹³

McAdams undertook his research with a sense of portentousness. Doubts about Adventist prophetic interpretation circulated among some Andrews faculty, and McAdams himself became convinced that without White's endorsement traditional prophetic views would be untenable. "It all rests on EGW," he recorded in his journal in 1971, "and it is not surprising that she is so much today the object of attention on the part of Adventist thinkers." McAdams's sense of professional mission was abetted by his outrage over perceived injustices being meted out to colleagues who questioned orthodoxy. "I am tired of being patient," he confided to himself.¹⁴

Yet Donald McAdams proved to be the very model of patience. He did not rush his work to *Spectrum* or any other organ. His caution rested on both practical and personal reasons. Partly it sprang from the charged atmosphere at Andrews during the 1970-71 school year, a volatile mix of spirituality and suspicion. A revival had swept campus at the beginning of fall term, one that soon spread to other Adventist campuses. The student activism of the previous few years faded, replaced by religious outreach activities. Board members and General Conference officials were delighted by developments. Still, at the constituency meeting in January to choose a new board, suspicions about faculty among some General Conference leaders were clear.

Faculty, on their part, felt the proceedings were yet another example of authoritarian leadership. McAdams, though sharing this discontent, was nonetheless pleased to hear that Robert Pierson singled him out among faculty as one who brought students closer to Christ. Later that spring, articles on theological and racial disputes within

Adventism were featured in *Newsweek* and *Christianity Today*. Church leaders bristled under the bad press, and a statement in the *Newsweek* piece claiming that many seminary faculty doubted a six-thousand-year-old earth only added to suspicions of academics.¹⁵

Not only church politics but also his being in line for an administrative post at Andrews (unrealized) gave McAdams pause. Ellen White scholarship could be poison. Better to avoid hints of theological unsoundness. The vice president for academic administration at Andrews, a mentor of McAdams from college, didn't even want to see his research. McAdams's father, now director of the General Conference Publishing Department, after reading his son's early paper advised him to show it to no one, lest his denominational future be jeopardized. Respect for his father always tempered McAdams's inclination to push ahead.¹⁶

Thus, instead of seeking publication, in mid-1971 he returned to the library for more research. This time, he examined *Great Controversy's* chapter six on John Huss and the Bohemian Reformation. In a fit of labor, McAdams completed a 105-page study by mid-December.¹⁷ He was more sure than ever of his findings. It would be necessary, he felt, for the White Estate and Adventists generally to revise their belief that all *Great Controversy's* historical description came from vision. Indeed, virtually none of its history came from visions, but instead from earlier historians. The inspired passages were limited to descriptions of supernatural activities of Christ and Satan.

These conclusions, disquieting though McAdams knew they would be, were not intended to destroy faith. Rather, he was always at pains to emphasize that Mrs. White herself acknowledged indebtedness in the book's Introduction: "The great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world;" she had written, "they are facts which none can gainsay. This history I have presented briefly, in accordance with the scope of the book." McAdams understood these words to be important qualifiers to her claims about inspiration.¹⁸

His strong convictions notwithstanding, McAdams once again resisted publication. Instead, he circulated eight copies among his academic circle in the following months. At this point, he considered his work finished. He had proven to his satisfaction that Ellen White utilized historical sources extensively.¹⁹

McAdams's decision to use academic back channels meant a slower circulation of his argument. But such means were safer and held promise of being better able to effect change among Adventist thought leaders. He certainly had reason for confidence, knowing he wasn't the only one pursuing this agenda. At the 1971 convention of the American Historical Association (inconveniently held every year between Christmas and New Year's), as he, William Peterson, and Ronald Numbers gathered for lunch, talk turned enthusiastically to the White project. Numbers, then teaching at Loma Linda University Medical School, would soon begin research on what would become the blockbuster of the entire White study enterprise, *Prophetess of Health*.²⁰

Adventist historians were interested in more than Ellen White. The early 1970s witnessed the coming of age of the Adventist historical profession (another manifestation of the growth of intellectual communities within Adventist higher education). During the 1972 AHA convention in New Orleans, the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians (ASDAH) was formed. The initial meeting occasioned what remains ASDAH's greatest contribution: a recommendation that the General Conference establish an archive for the preservation of church records and papers. McAdams had discovered the church's almost total lack of systematic record keeping and prepared a six-page document detailing a comprehensive records management program. His colleagues concurred, as did Arthur White (in attendance at McAdams's urging). White's concerns about uncontrolled use of materials led to some toning down of the proposal, but his support was no doubt crucial to its rapid adoption by the General Conference in spring of 1973. What this would ultimately mean for facilitating Adventist historical scholarship could scarcely be imagined.²¹

Donald McAdams's resolve to limit circulation of his study to a handful of trusted academics lasted only a year. He felt compelled to thrust his spear farther afield. By February 1973, he had sent a copy to top administrators at Andrews and the Lake Union, to the White Estate and *Review and Herald* editors. He did this in the face of warnings from his wife and from his mentor, Grady Smoot, and despite his own political caution. "I feel I had to do it,"

McAdams confided to his journal. "I have selected my jury well. If the Church cannot take this, given in the private way, then it is hardly worth my dedication. If it 'ruins' me, i.e. blocks administration, so be it."²² Thus began his multi-year encounter with the "brethren of experience" (Arthur White's term), a negotiated effort to set the parameters of *Great Controversy's* originality.

Early responses were encouraging. Richard Hammill accepted his thesis (though in his cautious manner suggested McAdams deposit the paper in James White Library's Heritage Room with a five-year lock on it). Charles Hirsch and Ronald Graybill phoned their concurrence. Even traditionalist church historian Mervyn Maxwell agreed. But Arthur White took a more measured view, and, per General Conference custom, appointed a committee to examine McAdams's work. "The committee is stacked," McAdams mused, "and I know what I can expect."²³

Nonetheless, his relationship with Arthur White was cordial. White was pleased that he had chosen not to share his findings beyond the brethren (though he did once chide McAdams for sending a copy to others not on the reading committee—an indication of the proprietary control White assumed over the research). Indeed, White was almost apologetic. "As I read what you have written, it became very clear to me that I had failed you, Don, and others of our history men," he wrote, "in not making available documentation which supports the viewpoint which seems very clear to us who work in the White Estate." "Let me tell you, Don, that we recognize that there are problems. We have always recognized this."

The cordiality could not disguise, however, an interpretive difference between the two men. McAdams believed that Ellen White admitted in *Great Controversy's* introduction that much of the narrative was not the product of inspiration. "The historical work that is described [by Ellen White] as being seen seems to be, in all but two, quite clearly activities of Christ and his angels or Satan and his angels." White's inspired comments, in McAdams's view, were restricted to metaphysical events. But Arthur White contended that literary borrowings were simply amplifications of things seen in vision. White was confident that statements by both Mrs. White and her son (his father) Willie would confirm this view. As for her occasional errors of fact, these he readily conceded as being of no more significance than similar factual contradictions one

finds in both Testaments (this being a point of apparent comfort to White, he appealed to it so often).²⁴

By late spring 1973, another figure in the White Estate would become equally essential to McAdams's research. Ronald Graybill, La Sierra College graduate, trained at the seminary, author of two books on Adventist history, was at a young age becoming the scholar-in-residence at the White Estate. Capable as a speaker and writer, he was proving to be a fresh public face for the stolid organization. In a manner still unperceived by Arthur White, Graybill represented liberal Adventism's veiled and ultimately subversive presence in the sanctum. He understood that there were errors in her writings, extending even into interpretive matters. But for the moment he remained a cautious voice.

He suggested that McAdams would find a more receptive hearing among his White Estate colleagues if he shaded his argument. "Instead of saying that this evidence demonstrates that she did not see these scenes in vision," he wrote to McAdams, "could you not say: The internal evidence indicates that Ellen White would not have needed any visionary experiences to gain the historical facts and historical interpretations which she presents in these chapters." The ability to compromise, Graybill urged, would improve McAdams's ability to do further research in the White material. Graybill further encouraged McAdams to visit the White Estate's archives and spend time reassuring Arthur White about his publishing intentions. He hinted at important documents contained therein.²⁵

That opportunity came soon. McAdams was already planning to spend the summer in Takoma Park, Maryland, beginning research on a history of the Adventist publishing work. But a trip to the White Estate indeed proved instructive. In one of those moments researchers live for, McAdams was directed by Graybill to a handwritten sixty-four sheet fragment of a draft for *Great Controversy's* half-chapter on Huss, the very section he had been vetting. If any doubts had remained regarding White's extensive use of sources, they were put to rest by the manuscript. But the rough-hewn, at times almost incoherent writing (McAdams labored over its transcription for weeks), raised other troubling questions about the degree of editing her assistants must have provided to create the 1888 edition. And why was it, McAdams wondered, that almost all of White's original material, which largely concerned the spiritual battles at work in the Reformation, were excised,

while the derivative material from Wylie came to comprise almost the entire chapter?²⁶

By the fall of 1973, with the evidence from the Huss chapter manuscript now included, "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians" began to assume its final form. The White Estate had not released the newly cited material, so McAdams was not free to distribute it as he wished. He had already decided that summer against going public with it. Too many people would be hurt by the abrupt revelations. Rather, McAdams kept his faith in a scholarly trickle-down effect: persuade the reasonable folk at the higher reaches of church leadership and let hard truths flow from there. In his most candid personal moments, McAdams admitted that his work might nourish skepticism about White—even within himself. But truth must be served.²⁷

For the moment, though, all roads ran through Arthur White. McAdams sent him a penultimate draft that fall. "I believe you will find my original thesis, which argued that Ellen White based her historical work on Wylie, reinforced. Indeed, I cannot see how else we can explain such an abundance of data." Graybill, who was also in the loop, enthused to McAdams, "A stupendous piece of work!" He advised on some tempering revisions, apparently in the belief that the entire manuscript would soon be published. Arthur White's reply in November was predictably more guarded, even defensive. He implored McAdams to avoid harsh conclusions about his grandmother's literary competence from the one manuscript. He believed it not representative of her corpus of writings. The limitations of her education must always be remembered. "I am sometimes a bit appalled," White scolded, "when men who have had the great privileges as you and others of our day have had, pass judgment on such a limited segment of materials examined. Is this par for the course on the part of historians?"²⁸

The following spring, McAdams sent off what he deemed his final draft. "I am sick of it," he confided to Graybill. Indeed, the work had consumed him for almost three years. In an Elijah moment, he despaired that his labors had "little prospect of it ever changing anybody unless it is published," and that seemed unlikely. He was equally candid with White. "As you know it is a dangerous area for Adventists to study. This I consider a great tragedy. It seems to me that this should be one of the areas in which study is encouraged." "Per-

haps I am being a bit unfair," McAdams continued, but though my scholarship "may not hurt me, [it] has not endeared me to anybody." And what would McAdams like to see as the fruit of his labors? "The mind I would most like to change is yours," he bluntly told White. "I would also like to have the Church administration realize the complexity of the question and perhaps acknowledge historical sources at least a little."²⁹

Even at this late date, McAdams continued to abide by the White Estate's wishes that he shield his work from other eyes (this being a condition for obtaining permission to transcribe the Huss fragment). This required him to implore Ronald Numbers not to cite his paper in his study of Ellen White and health reform, just accepted for publication that spring by Harper and Row. Numbers readily conceded to his former colleague's request. He congratulated him on recently becoming acting chair of the Andrews History Department, wryly adding that "when I get fired from LLU, you can get me a job. After all, you're partially responsible for my predicament."³⁰

In fact, Numbers's manuscript for *Prophetess of Health* would shoulder aside McAdams's for the attention of the White Estate. For the next two years, until Numbers's book appeared in 1976, White Estate staff members would be involved in efforts to critique, forestall, or respond to his work. Numbers was the perfect foil to McAdams. Whereas the latter sought to preserve the gift of prophecy for Ellen White, the former adopted a naturalistic posture toward the prophetess. Whereas McAdams worked patiently through "the brethren," Numbers headed straight for publication. Whereas McAdams continued to aspire to academic administration, Numbers understood that his actions would banish him from Adventist academe. Thus, although McAdams's manuscript was put on the shelf until 1976, he and his work scored points with the White Estate for proper attitude and procedure. Patience and loyalty further paid off for McAdams when in 1975 he was appointed president of Southwestern Adventist College.³¹

In the summer of 1976, Arthur White wrote McAdams

that at last he and his colleagues were turning their eyes fully upon his manuscript. This was to be a thorough examination, asking whether McAdams's sampling was indicative of White's general corpus of work. To this end, Ronald Graybill was tasked with analyzing another recently discovered manuscript fragment of White's, a draft for her treatment of Luther. (One of the happy side effects of the White Estate's being forced into responding to McAdams's work was its own insights into how a prophetess worked. It learned, for

example, that the Huss fragment was composed in Europe in preparation of a German edition of *Great Controversy*.) In short, it would be well into 1977 before the White Estate would be prepared to give a definitive statement.³²

New urgency was given to their efforts when in the spring of 1977 McAdams received an invitation to present his findings to the December meeting of the Adventist historians in Dallas. The time had come for public release, and no better audience existed for his inaugural presentation than his professional peers. Still, he needed Arthur White's permission to cite the Huss fragment. White, who repeatedly spoke of the need to assist denominational history teachers in their presentation of the *Spirit of Prophecy's* workings, could hardly refuse. But he wanted McAdams, whom he considered part of their "team," to join them at headquarters

in the fall after Annual Council to fine tune his paper.³³

Correspondence with Arthur White wasn't McAdams's only insight into the shifting political landscape of Takoma Park. Ronald Graybill provided a sympathetic insider's perspective. He had finished his study of the Luther chapter and came to conclusions similar to McAdams's. "White now accepts this point," Graybill assured him, and "he is carrying the ball." Not only did Arthur White have to face up to the extensive scope of his grandmother's borrowings, he had the uncomfortable job of selling the new orthodoxy to General Conference leadership. He would first brief President Pierson privately, then send the findings to all White Estate board members. Of course, leadership



already knew quite a bit about the disturbing facts. Willis Hackett, General Conference vice president, had been quoted as saying the McAdams study is "10 times worse" than Numbers's.³⁴

By late summer of 1977, the White Estate had produced its response to McAdams's research. It was a study of amazing thoroughness, right down to word counts (in a day before computers trivialized such tasks). It confirmed both extensive reliance on sources and factual errors. "These questions are too important to simply brush aside and sweep under the rug," wrote Robert Olson, "they must be dealt with honestly and frankly."³⁵ The study sought a confirming middle position between the verbal inspiration/infallibility model and a purely secular interpretation. "It is our understanding that all parts of the book *Great Controversy* are the products of inspiration by virtue of the fact that under inspiration they were either written by the author herself or were selected and incorporated into the book by her—a divinely inspired individual."³⁶ The burden of the study was to emphasize the human element of inspiration, a consideration often overlooked in traditional Adventism. To this end, a compilation of historical problems in the Old Testament was included, suggesting that human errors do not undermine inspiration.

Essentially a confirmation of his scholarship, the report would seem to have paved the way for a smooth final conference with McAdams in October. Yet the several editing sessions proved combative. White Estate staff sought to temper his prose, put the best possible face on problems and solutions. Graybill supported Arthur White's position in the meetings, then privately took McAdams to task for conceding too much. In fact, McAdams, who took a backseat to no one in political legerdemain, was conciliatory on most matters. He had the satisfaction of carrying his major point. And he believed that his research had started the Church down an important path toward clarity in matters of faith and inspiration. "The pragmatic administrators will like it," McAdams confided to his journal, "the conservatives will hate it but be unable to strike, the liberals will think I have sold out, but so what. To the moderates I will be a hero," he wrote. "... Politics takes precedence over belief in points not matters of conscience. My March 1973 draft is still my opinion."³⁷

But McAdams underestimated the reach of church conservatives. Just as he was preparing to deliver his findings

to the ASDAH conference, a political bombshell exploded. The White Estate response had made its way to the seminary and, among others, into the hands of Old Testament professor Gerhard Hasel.

Hasel was incensed both by McAdams's conclusions and by what he considered the White Estate's surrender to them. He quickly proceeded to critique both papers, purporting to show sloppy errors in McAdams's scholarship and a failure by the White Estate staff to research the matters for themselves.³⁸ Hasel had influential allies in the Biblical Research Institute, particularly Gordon Hyde, plus the sympathies of Robert Pierson. Essentially, Hasel and his supporters insisted that Ellen White was both inerrant and verbally inspired. Arthur White, the man most responsible for guarding his grandmother's writings, found himself in the unaccustomed and emotionally stressful position of being accused of insufficient diligence in that task. It was probably the only time in White Estate history when it found itself advocating a revisionist interpretation of Ellen White's writings.

White Estate staff, notably Ronald Graybill, responded by a full-court press of investigation, including getting pertinent Latin and Czech sources translated. Ultimately, McAdams's scholarship would be vindicated. But for the moment, Hasel's challenge empowered those General Conference leaders unhappy with the direction of things to lean on Arthur White. White, in turn, leaned on McAdams at the eleventh hour to postpone delivering his paper to ASDAH. "He wants me to give him time to win them [Pierson and Hackett] over," McAdams noted.³⁹

But McAdams had put off dissemination of his research long enough; he was not to be dissuaded. In truth, unauthorized earlier drafts of his study had long circulated. What was to be new here was inclusion of the Huss manuscript fragment, which the White Estate had earlier given him restricted permission to use in his presentation. White was very anxious about the meeting but reluctantly agreed that it must happen, appealing (vainly) for further revisions in McAdams's paper. The show would go on.⁴⁰

Adventist historians who traveled to Dallas for the annual meeting of the American Historical Association gathered in the Dallas Central Church for an early evening session. For McAdams, this was the moment he had anticipated for years. Not only his professional peers attended but also the White Estate staff and a sprinkling of

other church officials. He read his paper in a low-key manner, maintaining the tone of moderation that had served him well throughout his negotiations.

Response was resoundingly positive. Ronald Graybill and Robert Olson gave their endorsement. The historians were, of course, supportive, but upset at the continued restrictions on the Huss fragment by the White Estate, which prevented McAdams from circulating his paper. Eric Anderson, then a young professor at Pacific Union College, covered the meeting for *Spectrum*, "No further research is necessary," he concluded, "to demonstrate that *Great Controversy* should not be taken as an independent or infallible historical source."⁴¹

Both Graybill and McAdams had always hoped that the latter's pathbreaking study would soon find publication, whether in *Spectrum* or even in a short official church publication. This never happened. The needed release of the telltale fragment by the White Estate did not come, essentially holding McAdams's paper hostage. Nonetheless, over the next couple years McAdams gave public talks to well-attended Adventist Forum meetings at the major Adventist centers from Takoma Park to Berrien Springs to Loma Linda. A kindred study by Donald Casebolt concerning Ellen White's writings on the Waldensians reinforced conclusions about borrowing and, especially, fallibility.⁴²

Most notably, Adventist pastor Walter Rea began to make public his years of research on White's writing. The General Conference could no longer avert its eyes. A blue-ribbon panel of scholars and administrators (including McAdams) was convened in 1980 to give Rea a personal forum. It became clear that *Great Controversy* literary dependency was not unique. Rea, of course, went on to publish his provocative work, *The White Lie*. But the General Conference also determined it must sponsor its own research into the subject. Thus in 1980, Fred Veltman, religion professor at Pacific Union College, was asked to undertake a study of the sources for the *Desire of Ages*.⁴³

The appearance of Veltman's massive eight-year study in 1988 evoked little comment. Its very size militated against a broad readership, and church leadership showed little inclination to publicize it widely. Not that this mattered greatly. We already knew what we needed to know about the construction of Ellen White's historical works.⁴⁴

As the 1970s ended, America found itself discouraged by oil shortages, inflation, and humiliation by Iran. The Adventist Church plunged into a similar funk. The Desmond Ford controversy, which began in 1980, with all the internecine bitterness it entailed, ushered in an unhappy, highly contested era. In truth, the promise of Adventist liberalism had faded well before then. The Church, it seemed, was rather less interested in theological self-examination than the Andrews academic community had believed. The seminary at Andrews flourished as the training ground for ministers and educators from around the world. But the play of theological ideas was delimited, with preference for faculty with advanced degrees from evangelical institutions (and increasingly its own graduates) rather than from elite universities.

But liberal scholarship prevailed in one arena: it permanently revised our understanding of Ellen White's historical writings. For decades, a type of verbal inspiration dominated popular Adventism, shaping the church culture to a degree that today's generation of Adventist youth could hardly imagine. Within at least the educated mainstream church, that is no longer the case. Discussions proceed about historical and theological issues less encumbered by appeals to discussion-ending Red Book quotations. This matters because American Adventism now stands poised at what appears to be a new age of dialogue, driven by a sense of urgency about revitalizing the North American Church.

What does the earlier moment of Adventist liberal scholarship say about how scholars might currently support the cause of church revitalization? It suggests that there may be a place for both working within the system and going outside it. McAdams's influence with the White Estate flowed largely from his scrupulous efforts to be conciliatory. He built up a reservoir of good will that persuaded church leaders of his best intentions. Indeed, he not only thrust uncomfortable truths on the White Estate, he provided it with a plausible alternative to salvage White's status as a prophet. At the same time, without the very public no-holds-barred scholarship of Numbers and Rea it is not clear that McAdams's work alone would have gotten the official attention it did. McAdams and his work were embraced in part because they weren't Numbers's. Change, like basketball, may always need an inside-outside strategy.

The story should also remind us of the human costs that usually accompany wrenching change. Donald McAdams's journal records agonizing soul searching over his work, resulting in near spiritual exhaustion. Ronald Graybill's career at the White Estate came to an abrupt end a few years later, the victim of a dissertation that pushed interpretative freedom about Ellen White a step too far. Walter Rea, too, must be counted among the victims. And one can't disregard the pain caused to traditional believers, now shaken in their lifelong confidence in the literal words of "a prophet among us." Arthur White had to spend his final working years managing this vexed situation. Conservative fears, expressed by Gerhard Hasel, that "a position of diminished authority in one area will inevitably lead to uncertainty about authority in other areas" were not unfounded.⁴⁵ Necessary change, but still painful.

The North American Adventist Church in 2008 is far from the world it knew in 1970. The sense of confidence the Church shared with the nation forty years ago has largely evaporated. Growth is no longer assumed; simply holding our own is now the challenge. This suggests that a new "Adventist Project" must be generated. Once again, Adventist scholars must take it upon themselves to help reshape an Adventism that might carry meaning for contemporary America. The stakes are high, and resistance is certain. But we owe the church no less. ■

Notes and References

1. I am indebted to a number of people who shared their recollections of Andrews University with me, including Roy Branson, Donald Rhoads, Russell Staples, Ronald Numbers, and Harold Weiss.

2. Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Walter T. Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock Calif.: M and R, 1982). The best overview of the decades' research is found in Donald McAdams, "Shifting Views of Inspiration: Ellen White Studies in the 1970s," *Spectrum* 10.4 (1980). An in-depth and affecting recount of Ronald Numbers's experience is given by Jonathan M. Butler, "The Historian as Heretic," introduction to *Prophetess of Health*, revised edition, University of Tennessee Press, 1992. Although much has been written about the early days of White revisionism, we have had no recent attempts to assess the impact of this scholarship on Adventist perceptions of their prophet, apart, perhaps, from the Valuegenesis surveys of youth attitudes, which show a declining acceptance of traditional attitudes of White's prophetic office. V. Bailey Gillespie with Michael J. Donohue, *Valuegenesis: Ten Years Later* (La Sierra, Calif.: Hancock Center, 2004), 158–59.

3. Donald R. McAdams, e-mail to the author, Aug. 3, 2007.

4. A detailed and fair-minded discussion of the beginnings and early years of Andrews University is provided by Richard Hammill, *Pilgrimage: Memoirs of an Adventist Administrator* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1992), especially 73–138.

5. Hammill, *Pilgrimage*, chapter six. Ronald L. Numbers details these developments in his *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 290–98.

6. Phone conversations with Roy Branson and Harold Weiss have shaped my discussion of the Seminary. Richard Hammill, in his otherwise admirably candid memoirs, avoids discussion of the Seminary upheavals completely.

7. Donald Rhoads, phone conversation, Oct. 4, 2007; Rhoads, "Notes written around 1969 or 1970," unpublished recollection, copy sent to the author.

8. Donald McAdams, "Riding on the Point of the Spear," undated typescript, in McAdams files.

9. Branson and Weiss, "Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," *Spectrum* (autumn 1970): 30–33; William S. Peterson, "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution," (autumn 1970): 57–69.

10. William Peterson, phone conversation with the author, Sept. 6, 2007.

11. The ongoing debate occurred in a series of articles over the next year: W. Paul Bradley, "Ellen G. White and Her Writings" (spring 1971): 43–64; William S. Peterson, "An Imaginary Conversation on Ellen G. White" (spring 1971): 84–91; John W. Wood, "The Bible and the French Revolution: An Answer" (autumn 1971): 55–72; William S. Peterson, "Ellen White's Literary Indebtedness" (autumn 1971): 73–84. The issue of *Spectrum* in which Peterson's original article appeared also featured three other short pieces on Ellen White, suggesting that a moment of Adventist revisionism had clearly arrived. In one, Richard Lewis, professor of English at Loma Linda University, wondered out loud if we had proper warrant to apply the biblical term *Spirit of Prophecy* to Mrs. White ("The Spirit of Prophecy," 69–72). A second, by Fred Harder, Sr., dean of graduate studies at Andrews University, sought to broaden the church's view of the nature of inspiration, hinting that we ought not to look to White for authoritative factual statements about the past ("Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," 30–33).

12. William Peterson, phone conversation with the author Sept. 6, 2007.

13. McAdams, e-mail to the author, Nov. 29, 2007; "Ellen G. White on the English Reformation," unpublished paper; "The Historical Writings of E. G. White: A Personal View, to be Read before Reading Mrs. White and the English Reformation," unpublished paper.

14. McAdams journal, Sept. 22, 1971.

15. Ibid., Jan, 29, 1971; Sept. 22, 1971; "The Day of the Adventists," *Newsweek*, June 7, 1971; Stanley Sturges, "The Growing Quarrel among Seventh-day Adventists," *Christianity Today*, June 18, 1971, 12–13.

16. McAdams journal, July 10, 1971.

17. "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians," typescript, 15–16.

18. Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, Introduction, (1888 edition), xiii–xiv; McAdams journal, Dec. 24, 1971.

19. McAdams journal, Dec. 24, 1971; McAdams, e-mail to the author, Dec. 8, 2007.

20. McAdams journal, Dec. 29, 1971.

21. Ibid., Dec. 29, 1972; McAdams, e-mail to the author, Dec. 8, 2007.

22. McAdams journal, Feb. 13, 1973.

23. Ibid., Mar. 2, 1973; May 11, 1973. Examples of responses to his work found in various letters: Don F. Neufeld to McAdams, Mar. 7, 1973, Willis Hackett to McAdams, Mar. 7, 1973, Mervyn Maxwell to McAdams, May 4, 1973, all in Donald R. McAdams Papers, Center for Adventist Research (CAR), Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich.

24. A. L. White to Donald McAdams, Feb. 27, 1973; Apr. 18, 1973; McAdams to White, Mar. 9, 1973, McAdams Papers, CAR. In one letter, Arthur White solicits McAdams's help in sorting out the discrepant

accounts of the Gadarene man in the Gospels, an allusion apropos nothing in their exchanges except as an indirect means of reinforcing the point that Scripture has errors just as certainly as does Mrs. White's writings—with no consequent diminishment of inspiration. White to McAdams, Apr. 8, 1973, CAR.

25. Graybill to McAdams, May 3, 1973, McAdams Papers, CAR.

26. McAdams journal, Aug. 17, 1973; McAdams to Graybill, Aug. 21, 1973; Graybill to McAdams, Aug. 23, 1973; McAdams to White, Sept. 18, 1973, all three letters in McAdams Papers, CAR.

27. McAdams journal, July 11, 1973.

28. McAdams to White, Sept. 18, 1973; Graybill to McAdams, Nov. 5, 1973; White to McAdams, Nov. 26, 1973, all in McAdams Papers, CAR.

29. McAdams to Graybill, Mar. 31, 1974; McAdams to White, Mar. 29, 1974, all in McAdams Papers, CAR.

30. McAdams to Numbers, May 4, 1974; Numbers to McAdams, May 11, 1974, all in McAdams Papers, CAR.

31. Despite McAdams's moderation and his Takoma Park pedigree, his Ellen White research was sufficiently disturbing to cause Robert Pier-son to speak to the Southwestern Adventist College board chairman in an attempt to nix his appointment as president. McAdams e-mail to the author, Jan. 22, 2008.

Christianity And Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part One: Autobiographical

1. Learning to Spin the Coin of Truth
2. A Pastor's Perspective: Growing Up Adventist and Gay
3. Homosexuality and Seventh-day Adventist Families
4. Response: Whose Choice? Which Closet?

Part Two: Biomedical Perspectives

5. Biological Determinants of Homosexual Orientation
Homosexuality: Is it a Choice or Innate—Biology or Sin?
6. Psychiatry, Antihomosexual Bias, and Challenges for Gay and Lesbian Youth
7. Response: Science and Sexual Orientation

Part Three: Behavior Science Perspectives

8. Interaction and Angst: The Social Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Seventh-day Adventists

9. The Caring, Welcoming Church? The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Its Homosexual Members

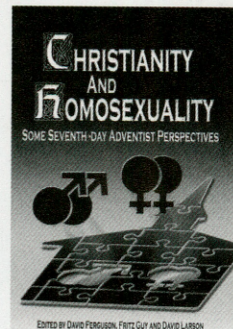
10. Response: Social Experiences in the "Caring Church"?

Part Four: Scriptural Perspectives

11. "In Christ There Is Neither...":
Toward the Unity of the Body of Christ
12. Same-Sex Love: Theological Considerations
13. Response: Same-sex Love in the "Body of Christ"?

Part Five: Christian Social Perspectives

14. Christian Sexual Norms Today: Some Proposals
15. Ministering to Gays within the Church Community:
A Pastoral Perspective
16. Public Policy Issues Involving Homosexuality:
An Adventist Response
17. Response: Weighing the Issues



32. White to McAdams, June 9, 1976; White to McAdams, Oct. 15, 1976; White to McAdams, Dec. 3, 1976; White to McAdams, Apr. 29, 1977. All in McAdams personal files.
33. McAdams to White, Apr. 13, 1977; White to McAdams, Apr. 29, 1977, McAdams personal files.
34. McAdams journal, Aug. 13, 1977.
35. "Questions and Problems Pertaining to Mrs. White's Writings on John Huss." Introduction, "The Unpublished Manuscript Fragment," by Robert W. Olson. Copy held in McAdams personal files.
36. "The Historical Section of *Great Controversy*: A Summary of White Estate Staff Conclusions," 42. Copy in McAdams personal files.
37. McAdams journal, Oct. 17, 1977.
38. Hasel, "A Review of the White Estate Paper, 'The Role of Visions and the Use of Historical Sources in the Writings of the *Great Controversy*'" (third draft, revised Oct. 24, 1977), copy in McAdams files.
39. McAdams journal, Dec. 6, 1977.
40. Ibid., Jan. 1, 1978.
41. Ibid.; Anderson, "Ellen White and Reformation Historians," *Spectrum* (July 1978):26.
42. Donald Casebolt, "Ellen White, the Waldenses, and Historical Interpretation," *Spectrum* (Feb. 1981):37-43.
43. "Full Report of the Life of Christ Research Project" (Nov. 1988). The report is available online at the General Conference Archives Web site: www.adventistarchives.org/documents.asp?CatID=13&SortBy=1&ShowDateOrder=True.
44. McAdams addressed the lingering issue of White's authority in a 1985 *Spectrum* article, "The Scope of Ellen White's Authority" (Aug. 1985):1-7.
45. Hasel, "A Review of the White Estate Paper," 29.

A Note on Sources

Donald McAdams deposited some of his correspondence in the Center for Adventist Research (CAR), Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Letters deposited in the CAR are cited as such. Citations from other letters, unpublished manuscripts, and his personal journal remain in his possession. Journal entries were frequently made several days after the events described, so date of entry does not necessarily indicate date of event. I wish to thank McAdams for access to his journals and correspondence. All quotations are by permission.

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Spectrum Blog

Continued from page 20...

dark, for together we can stitch together a shoddy imitation of God's Truth that transcends any individual's capacity to know or create.

Humility transcends differences between communities who need each other to patch unique and disparate holes in our comprehension of God. There is no I in Yahweh.

Pomo Guy, May 15, 2008

The Cognitive Revolution

DAVID BROOKS HAS an excellent op-ed article titled "The Neural Buddhists," in the May 13, 2008, issue of the *New York Times* <<http://nytimes.com/2008/05/13opin-ion/13brooks.html?>>. In it, he makes this cogent statement:

And yet my guess is that the atheism debate is going to be a sideshow. The cognitive revolution is not going to end up undermining faith in God, it's going to end up challenging faith in the Bible....Orthodox believers are going to have to defend particular doctrines and particular biblical teachings. They're going to have to defend the idea of a personal God, and explain why specific theologies are true guides for behavior day to day.... We're in the middle of a scientific revolution. It's going to have big cultural effects.

He also says:

[U]nderneath the patina of different religions, people around the world have common moral intuitions....People are equipped to experience the sacred, to have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love. God can best be conceived as the nature one experiences at those moments, the unknowable total of there is.

People can experience the existence of the sacred, but think that particular religions are just cultural artifacts built on top of universal traits.

This is the postmodern world, where specific religions or theological beliefs no longer hold sway as they once did in modern times. Is the church up to the task?

Elaine Nelson, May 15, 2008