SUNRISE

Ellen White Returns Home:

The Ellen White Project—2009 | BY BEVERLY BEEM

It was the day before sixty-plus scholars of Ellen White and nineteenth-century religious history were to meet for a working conference to produce a scholarly book on Ellen White. Terrie Aamodt, Ginger Harwood, and I were poking around the city of Portland, Maine, looking for the places familiar to those of us who consider the story of Ellen White a part of our heritage. We saw the Deering Woods Park where Ellen was struck by a rock; visited the waterfront where Ellen was baptized; found her school, now turned into a deli; and the place where her childhood church was located. Typically in New England, a plaque marks places of historic interest, but nowhere in Portland did we see an acknowledgement of one of its most prominent daughters. Ask most anyone in Portland what they know of Ellen Harmon White, and the answer would be a quizzical "who?"

That widespread unawareness of the existence of Ellen Harmon White is one of the problems this conference was called to address. By setting the conference in her childhood home, the participants could see the setting in which Ellen Harmon grew up. It also introduced the people of her own home town to one of the most influential American women of the nineteenth century, one who grew up in their midst. Portland provided the ideal setting to introduce twenty-one non-Adventist scholars in nineteenth-century American religious history to a woman they likely knew little about.

Adventist historians have known that their denomination is little known in general religious studies circles. They observed that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the four most innovative denominations founded in the United States in the nineteenth century, along with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the Church of Christ, Scientist; and the Jehovah's Witnesses. At the present time, the Adventist church has the largest worldwide membership of the four. Gary Land, professor and chair of history and political studies at Andrews University and the lead editor of the book, explained, "The LDS denomination and its leaders have undergone thorough historical treatment, and Christian Science has been extensively examined as well. Much less attention has been accorded the Witnesses and the Adventists. Wider scholarly discussions on Ellen White are long overdue." To illustrate, while a search of scholarly book titles on Mormonism, Joseph Smith, and Brigham Young yields over one hundred titles and for Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy, several dozen, a search of titles on Seventh-day Adventism and Ellen White yields fewer than ten.

The vision for a historical conference on Ellen White in the context of her times began with the Adventist historians who met at the 2007 session of the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians Triennial Conference. Four historians took on the job of coordinating the event: Gary Land; Ron Numbers, Hilldale professor of the history of science and medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; Terrie Aamodt, professor of history and English at Walla Walla University; and Julius Nam, asso-

SUNRISE ON THE LIGHTHOUSE AT FT WILLIAM & PORTLAND HEADLIGHT PORTLAND, MAINE. MARCH 22, 2008 BY DONCONNOR2 AT WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/24437487@N00/2362724515/

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ciate professor of religion at Loma Linda University. The outcome of the conference will be a book, *Ellen White: American Prophet*, to be published by a major university press. Professor Land said, "Ellen White has been identified with Anne Hutchinson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Baker Eddy, and Aimee Semple McPherson as one of the most prominent women in American religious history; yet, she is one of the least studied and understood. This work will encourage further examination and discussion of her role in history."[1]

The planned book is in its essence a collaborative effort. The process was to assign twenty-one chapters on various aspects of her life to specialists in Ellen White and her contexts and to distribute the papers to respondents. Each chapter received a formal response by two scholars in a related area. In addition, Grant Wacker, professor of Christian history at Duke University, was invited to write the foreword to the book, and George Knight, professor emeritus of church history at Andrews University, was asked to take up the task of writing the afterword that will evaluate the book's place in Adventist studies. Terrie Aamodt said, "Adventists bring a deep understanding of Ellen White's life, and other scholars bring fresh eyes to apply those details to a wider context." Jon Paulien, professor and dean of the School of Religion at Loma Linda University, referred to the non-SDA participants as "almost a 'Who's Who' in American religious studies."[2]

A view of the waterfront area in Portland, Maine.

Randall Stephens, associate professor of history at Eastern Nazarene College, reported his reaction to the invitation to attend an Ellen White Conference. He said, "I know so little about White and Adventism—something I found on further investigation that I share with other participants…that I hesitated to take part at first. But the organizers hoped that those outside the field would ask broad questions about research and writing. I rushed to my library to read Ron Numbers' biography *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*. Yet I only had time to crack the book. So, into the breach."[3]

As we gathered at the conference site in the Regency Hotel, it was good to see old friends who had invested themselves in Ellen White studies; it was good to meet new friends, many of whom we knew by reputation. We may have read some of their works or heard them speak at conventions. Now we could see them in action as we all turned our attention to the task at hand. The conference felt like one huge conversation with over sixty partners. The setting around a large rectangular table, provided with water pitchers and microphones, reinforced that dynamic.

With the participants assembled, Gary Land set out the one ground rule first articulated by Ron Numbers: no bashing and no apologetics. They were gathered for the scholarly task of examining the place of Ellen White in American history. The conference worked on a tight schedule with forty-five minutes devoted to each book chapter. Articles and responses were distributed to all participants in advance, along with response forms for each article. Each session granted ten minutes apiece to the author and two respondents with fifteen minutes open to all participants. The chapters covered many aspects of her life and work: the shaping of the Adventist community, early religious experiences, religious culture of her times, the *Testimonies*, science and medicine, race relations, historiography, popular culture,

The schoolhouse (now a deli) that Ellen attended.

mind and metaphysics, society, theology, eschatology, institution building, women's roles, education, Ellen White as an author, Ellen White as a public speaker, Ellen White from the inside, Ellen White from the outside. Terrie Aamodt observed, "The discussion that results from this merger of authors and respondents, Adventists and non-Adventists, Ellen White scholars and specialists in all aspects of her contexts is what we wish academic discourse would always be like."

The Adventist participants were impressed with the vigor and seriousness that their non-Adventist colleagues brought to the assigned task. They came early and stayed late. And they worked hard alongside the chapter authors to help them identify and clarify the insider language of the Adventist world. They helped situate Ellen White's place in nineteenth-century America. The questions in the minds of these scholars centered upon who she was as a woman and what she accomplished in cofounding a world-wide church. They looked at the institutions she established. How was a woman with a third-grade education able to establish colleges and universities and the largest parochial school system in the Protestant world? How was a near-invalid able to establish hospitals and medical institutions like Loma Linda? How did she establish a public voice outside the sphere accorded to women in the nineteenth century? How did she deal with the demands of motherhood, marriage, travel, and writing? How did she become an orator that held the attention of crowds of 20,000 in open-air temperance lectures? What vision for the community did she have? What kind of a spiritual leader was she? Gary Land said, "All the questions, comments, and suggestions that emerged in the discussion indicate how much there is to know and how much remains to be explored."

These scholars were intrigued by what they were learning about Ellen White. They said in any number of ways that Adventists were sitting on a gold mine. The questions our guest scholars were interested in were not always the same ones the Adventist scholars brought to the table. Some of the embarrassing issues, like plagiarism, were of slight interest to them. Joan Hedrick, Charles A. Dana Professor of History at Trinity College and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe—a contemporary of Ellen White—helped us put these things in context.[4] Ciro Sepulveda, professor and chair of the history department at Oakwood University, asked her specifically, "It's clear from hearing your talk that you have profound admiration for your subject, but how do you deal with the flaws?" Hedrick responded:

> *I view them as great complications of the plot, as good material for biographers. And they really are—the flaws, that's what brings a person into sharp focus. Nobody is human without having flaws. To see the flaws as well as the virtues, and how they intersect—we can all see in ourselves that our strengths also have a downside. Seeing the human is seeing the human being whole. I don't see it as a problem; I see it as a possibility. I see it as great literary material and sometimes as great didactic material. I see the greatest problem of Harriet Beecher Stowe as the author of* Uncle Tom's Cabin *that in her own relationships with black women she was not the egalitarian that I would have hoped she was. That has to be said about most abolitionists in the 19th century. They wanted to abolish slavery, but that did not mean they wanted to be social equals with black people. They just wanted to have that legal institution gone, but they did not want to have lunch with them. The North segregated the lunch counters and the trolley cars and all of this—I was very aware at various points that Stowe was seeing black people through her middle class white eyes and wasn't really seeing the people that were right in front of her, in spite of writing that wonderful story of a life.*

Neither bashing nor hagiography will produce sound scholarship. The historians saw that principle at work in Hedrick's model biography. The questions being asked within the Adventist church about White's plagiarism and her statements that seem rooted in her times need to be dealt with, but they do not destroy her. They are part of the richness of the fabric and only a small part of the fabric. They do not detract from the influence of this woman who brought a world-wide church out of the tattered remnants of the Millerite movement.

Grant Wacker, who is writing a biography of the contemporary religious figure Billy Graham, discussed some of the challenges of writing a cultural biography.[5] While we are studying Ellen White in her nineteenth-century contexts, he is studying Billy Graham, born three years after Ellen White died, in his twentieth-century contexts. Billy Graham could not have been a Billy Graham in the nineteenth century. We cannot know what Ellen White would have been in the twenty-first century. Biographers approaching their subject as insiders face the temptation to protect the subject, but hagiographers do more damage to the subject than debunkers. Hagiography simply is not true. The subject is not a marble statue. The hagiographer loses credibility, and the subject loses humanity. What biographers must be is fair. They must be able to understand the world as the subject sees it, and they must be able to look the subject in the eye afterwards. Wacker reminded us that anyone who is writing a biography is probably writing about someone who has accomplished a great deal, probably a lot more than we have, and that should give us some perspective. He concluded with,

A typical street scene in Portland, Maine.

> *Biography enables us to live the present in the light of the past. It turns the evaluation question around: the task is not so much for us as biographers to evaluate them, but to stand back, and, with humility, allow their lives to evaluate us.*

Part of the task of understanding the work of Ellen White is understanding the Adventist community that she helped shape. We invited our guest scholars to experience an Adventist worship with us at 7:00 Sabbath morning in the historic First Parish Church in downtown Portland. There we sang Ellen White's favorite hymns and listened as Kendra Haloviak, associate professor of New Testament studies at La Sierra University, spoke about the weeping in the night that turns to joy in the morning. The psalms of disorientation (Psalms 30 and 137) speak of the songs of weeping sung in a strange land.[6] She said, "It's a bold act of faith to say you can't sing in a strange land even as you sing a new song. It's a bold act of faith to shake a fist to the heavens on October 23 and to say, 'Where are you?' because more than anything you wanted to be in the presence of God." She described the movement of the heart from weeping in the night to joy in the morning. She asked, "How does one move from 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' to 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow?'" The Adventist experience is born in that movement from the Great Disappointment to the Great Advent Hope. She said,

> *At their best, communities of faith do what the psalms do. They take the seasons of life and bring them to speech—seasons of orientation and disorientation and new orientation. Communities of faith know great disappointments and they weep and they weep until the day dawns. But then—there's a brand new day, and those same communities of faith sing their Advent hymns once again.*

Another view of the waterfront area in Portland, Maine.

The Ellen White Project still has work to do. The conference is over, and the book is in progress. What might all this mean to Ellen White studies in the future? Certainly this conference was unprecedented. Ron Numbers said that it was "the most important event in Ellen White studies since 1919." One thing is clear: Ellen White will be more visible in the future. With the foundation laid by this conference, she should more easily find her place in the histories of American religion. There should be more openness, both ways. Adventist scholars need not fear the scrutiny of peer review. An understanding of Ellen White is their gift to American history. Non-Adventist scholars will have a resource that orients them to the major issues in Ellen White studies and establishes a foundation for continuing work. The work of American religious historians and Adventist church historians can only be enriched by the collaboration.

My hope is that Ellen White will come to be recognized as one of Christianity's great spiritual teachers. I would like to see some of her writings listed as classics in spiritual literature. Her testimonies are pastoral epistles written to people and churches facing the difficult realities of lived religion. Her devotional books guide people in the process of sanctification to restore the image of God in the soul. I would like to see the spirituality of the Adventist church understood and embraced in the context of our history as a rich and distinctive tradition, a gift to the Christian world.

I hope this conference will inspire Adventists to see their own heritage with fresh eyes and embrace it with a new passion. It may be that by understanding Ellen White in her historical contexts, we can learn to hear her voice more clearly in ours. ■

Notes and References

1. See the conference website, http://ellenwhiteproject.word-press.com, for pictures of the conference and additional information.

2. See Jon Paulien's five-part entry, "An Historic Event" on his blog http://revelation-armageddon.com for another account of the conference. Alden Thompson, professor of biblical studies at Walla Walla University also wrote an account on the www.spectrummagazine.org/blog. See also the interview with Gary Land on the Ellen White Project by David Hamstra, www.spectrum-magazine.org/blog/2009/11/15/interview_gary_land_ellen_white; and the two-part report by Jared Wright of a follow-up conference at Loma Linda University, "Ellen White in a New Key—LLU, December 6, 2009," www.spectrummagazine.org/blog/2009/12/05/ellen-white.

3. Randall Stephens, Religion in America Blogspot. http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2009/10/ellen-white-project-portland. Amanda Porterfield, Robert A. Spivey professor of religion and professor of history at Florida State University and the co-editor of *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, reported on the same site.

4. Joan Hedrick's book is *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

5. Grant Wacker's book is tentatively titled *Billy Graham and the Making of Heartland America*.

6. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

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