

## Making History: A Review of *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* | BY DAVID HOLLAND

This book is both symbol and substance. Perhaps in some way that is true of all books, but *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* has a special claim to both symbolic and substantive importance.

First, the symbolism. This volume, and the conference on which it is based, represent a long overdue recognition of Ellen White's wide historical significance and—by implication—a corrective to an almost inexplicable historiographical neglect. It is impossible to review this book adequately without saying something about the strange scholarly lacuna to which it symbolically speaks.

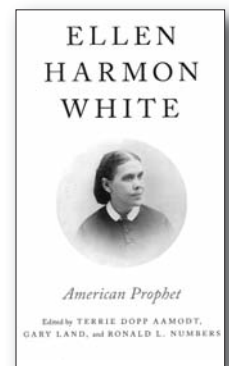
Searching for the terms “*Mary Baker Eddy* and *Christian Science*” in JSTOR—the premier digitized collection of scholarly journals—yields 446 hits. A similar search for “*Joseph Smith* and *Mormon*” returns over 2,500. The frequency of references to “*Ellen G. White* and *Adventist*” registers considerably lower at 109. Even when one searches across the permutations of White's names, combined with *Adventist*, the figures remain rather modest: *Ellen White* (101), *Ellen Gould White* (nine), *Ellen Harmon White* (six), and *Ellen Gould Harmon White* (four). Thus, although Seventh-day Adventism's membership statistics significantly exceed those of Smith's church and dwarf those of Eddy's, the scholarly literature has mentioned her at a fraction of the rate at which it has engaged the others.

The reasons for this striking disparity are easy to suppose and difficult to prove. This very volume underscores a number of them. Perhaps the imbalance stems from a denomina-

tional history in which White split credit for founding Seventh-day Adventism with her husband and Joseph Bates, whereas Eddy and Smith shared the founder's limelight with no one. Maybe it derives from the fact that such a high percentage of SDA growth has come in the global south, a region toward which too many American and European scholars have been oblivious. It possibly reflects the relative orthodoxy of SDA theology and praxis: Mormon theosis and polygamy, like Christian Science's radical immaterialism and healing, tend to demand attention in ways that sacralized Saturdays and water cures cannot quite match. If we could ask her, undoubtedly Ellen White would have her own answer for her relatively low profile among secular academics: Such is to be expected from a humanity listing toward destruction. Children of this world would always be more interested in the “agents of the great deceiver” than in the messenger of the remnant (207).

And yet there remain so many reasons why she cannot continue to lag as a distant third in the historiography of American prophets. Not least among these is that Ellen White was clearly committed to the importance of history. Her *Great Controversy* (the book she hoped would have the largest circulation of all her writings) warns of the judgment to come, but only after detailing events that had passed. Any close observer of White's prophetic career would perceive the unmistakable message that in order to accurately look *forward* one must attentively look *back*. And her people have looked back. As *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* testifies,

**The first of two reviews of:**



Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

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Seventh-day Adventism has generated intense historical debates and a robust community of historians. Some have left the fold, many have remained, but all bear the marks of a shared tradition in which history matters.

Since at least the 1970s some of those historians have done the heavy scholarly lifting to begin placing Ellen White where she belongs, in the foreground of American religious history. To date, no single piece of scholarship symbolizes the fruits of their labors more effectively than the book under review here. The volume is largely the product of scholars with Adventist ties, many of its chapters written by the very figures who have dedicated their professional lives to accurate historical engagements with White. But this is so much more than an intra-denominational discourse. As the book attests, the intellectual energy generated by historians of Adventism has in recent years attracted the interest and involvement of some of the most influential figures in American religious history: Grant Wacker, for example, writes a compelling forward to the volume, while Ann Taves provides a rich chapter on "Visions." Furthermore, the 2009 conference on which the book is based drew an impressive group of participants from across the scholarly and religious landscape. The book's existence and form—published by a leading academic press, written largely by well-trained scholars with Adventist connections, drawing the attention and even the participation of American historians of various orientations and considerable renown—is as important as anything the book contains. And it contains a lot.

As an accessible treatment of White's history

on an array of topics, this volume is simply incomparable. Not a reference work like Denis Fortin's and Jerry Moon's massive newly published *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, nor an integrated biographical treatment like Ronald L. Numbers' *Prophetess of Health*, the book is a collection of mostly well-crafted essays that focus on particular aspects of White's story. All of the chapters contain vital information and a number of them provide helpful analytical frames in



which to make sense of a unique life and legacy. In the book's final paragraph Gary Land issues a challenge that he believed the volume begins to answer: Land felt that work on White has largely been too narrow both in terms of the aspects of her life it considers and in terms of investigating that life's broad implications for American history generally. His concluding critique establishes a pair of standards by which we might judge the book's success.

On the matter of topical breadth, the book hits Land's target: seventeen essays on seventeen separate aspects of White's history, from institution building to theological development to her views on arts and culture. Collectively, the essays testify to the remarkable range of her interests and activities. She was much more than health reform and possible plagiarism. On the matter of drawing out the implications of White's life for broader questions of wide historiographical concern, however, the book responds to Land's call more equivocally. The essays are uneven in terms of the effort they make both to situate White in a richer context and to demonstrate why she matters to larger historiographical questions. And yet the book

as a whole does indeed consistently show that time and place matter.

To that end, it is fitting that the volume contains two essays by Jonathan M. Butler—a scholar long committed to understanding White in her cultural context—including the biographical sketch with which the book opens. Butler's chapters situate White in intersecting histories of Jacksonian democracy, Victorian domesticity, Civil War cataclysm and post-war confidence. Not merely the product of her culture, nor unaffected by it, she thus proves a valuable point of comparison to the more familiar narratives of American history.

Butler is hardly alone in his contextual sensibilities. For Ann Taves, White's visionary setting was shaped by Methodism's promise of divine presence, Millerism's ability to produce a cacophony of charismatic voices, and mesmerism's threat as a rival source of visionary experience. Ronald Numbers and Rennie Schoepflin depict Ellen White's declarations on science and medicine as influenced by existing work on health and sexual reform, strongly reactive to the era's "mind healing" vogue, heavily shaped by physicalist convictions and indirectly influential on later creationist views (207). Douglas Morgan analyzes her complex cooperation with the temperance movement, her critical response to both labor organization and the capitalist oppression of the poor, and her effort throughout to eschew coercive measures and maintain her apocalyptic commitments. Benjamin McArthur's White resisted the novel-reading trends of her day and lamented the world's craze for sports, while cautiously embracing certain kinds of fictional litera-



ture and visual arts. Eric Anderson's essay on "War, Slavery and Race" is by its very nature thoroughly contextual, as it depicts her pessimistic views on both emancipation and Civil War, her controversial opinion of the government's assumption of moral responsibility, and her balance of courageous rhetoric and cautious policy in response to entrenched American racism. Similarly, Laura Vance's treatment of gender places White in a "precarious position"

where she had to carve out stances that were true to her own rather radical belief that God wanted women to build the church in a variety of prominent and remunerated roles while not excessively provoking the often misogynistic culture surrounding her (279).

Other essays in the volume prove somewhat less interested in linking Ellen White to large historical themes and big historiographical questions, but even these still depict a prophet

very much engaged with and relevant to her surroundings. Graeme Sharrock's essay explicitly laments the "social and historical void" in which White's testimonies have been read and observes that her visionary ideas came embedded in a nexus of "images, narratives, emotions, bodily sensations, memories, and social encounters" (53, 63). Fritz Guy's treatment of her theology, which he sees as a mix of conservative and progressive impulses, locates White in a culture of biblical literalism and anti-Catholicism. Setting her in relation to James White's Christian Connexion background, Bert Haloviak charts a fascinating shift from her early legalism to an emphasis on imputed righteousness. Ronald Graybill shows how

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White's prophetic persona reflected Methodist reading, drew from revelatory predecessors (including the remarkable African American prophet William Foy), and contrasted with Mormon forms. Arthur Patrick's discussion of White as "author" considers her composition and publication processes but also wrestles with the way such processes were understood by those around her. In detailing the central importance of public speaking in White's life, ministry, and legacy, Terrie Dopp Aamodt distinguishes her early efforts to speak from the elite women who lectured as reformers, placing her instead with the charismatics of the more radical religious movements. Floyd Greenleaf and Jerry Moon—considering White as an indefatigable institution builder—compare her health-focused pedagogy to the educational theories of Horace Mann and show how her view of medical education had to deal with the accreditation requirements of a newly professionalized culture. As essay after essay connects each of its themes to different aspects of White's social and cultural context, one of the most valuable benefits of the book's structure becomes apparent: a variety of authors attending to tightly-defined aspects of White's story not only give us a richer portrait of her career, but also a more nuanced sense of the world in which she functioned.

Though White's relationship to her world forms something of a leitmotif that recurs (with more or less emphasis) throughout the volume, the book is still very much about *her* rather than her context. In the world but not wholly of it, she acts and repeatedly refuses to be acted upon. A review of the endnotes that follow each chapter illustrates the fact that White's own words form the bone and marrow of the book. Her voice comes through. She is the overwhelming force that shapes these stories. Ironically, that point is made particularly clear in the last three chapters, those that deal with posthumous matters. In the book's most idiosyncratic and insular essay, T. Joe Willey suggests that the unusual and secretive burial

steps taken after the deaths of James and Ellen White could reflect Ellen's teachings that some elect people rise to heaven prior to the Second Coming. That her sons may have arranged her burial in accordance with these beliefs suggests that her doctrines weighed heavily on her children even after she had gone. The fierce century-long debates about her literary estate and doctrinal authority among Seventh-day Adventists, documented in Paul McGraw's and Gilbert Valentine's penultimate essay, highlight the length and breadth of the shadow she continues to cast over the church. Even here we see how context matters—as a number of her books have been revised to speak more effectively to a modern audience—but it is still her words that persist. Finally, the late Gary Land's concluding chapter on "Biographies" amply illustrates the point made earlier in this review and repeatedly by this book: History matters—really matters—to Seventh-day Adventists and to Seventh-day Adventism. And that may be Ellen Harmon White's most lasting, most important and most complicated legacy of all, a legacy to which this book bears unmistakable witness. ■

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religious history at Harvard Divinity School. He is the author of *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* and is currently at work on a comparative study of Ellen White and Mary Baker Eddy.