

## A Historical Inquiry: Review of Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet | BY DENIS FORTIN

**E**llen Harmon White: American Prophet is the newest book published on Ellen White studies and is edited by three historians well-known to Adventists: Terrie Dopp Aamodt, professor of history and English at Walla Walla University; Gary Land, late professor emeritus of history at Andrews University (we are saddened by Gary's recent death on April 26); and Ronald Numbers, Hilldale professor emeritus of the history of science and medicine and of religious studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The book contains eighteen chapters that came from presentations at a conference on Ellen White held in Portland, Maine, in October 2009, on the 165th anniversary of the Great Disappointment of 1844. Most of the authors come from the Adventist tradition and a few from other religious expressions. Overall, the book is a historical inquiry into the cultural context and contributions of Ellen White's life and ministry. One of the great benefits of this new book is the interest Ellen White's life and writings are generating among non-Adventist historians, and such a book published by a well-known scholarly press is bound to generate even more interest into the role Ellen White played in nineteenth-century American religious life.

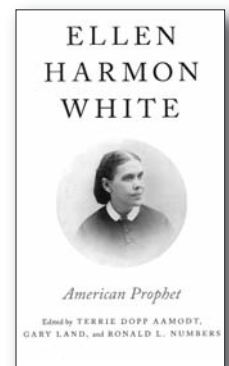
Along with two other major publications, the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* that Jerry Moon and I edited<sup>1</sup> and the forthcoming publication of the first volume of Ellen White's annotated letters and manuscripts from 1845–1859,<sup>2</sup> I am delighted to see a resurgence of scholarly works on the life and ministry of Ellen White.

All three publications will generate a lot of renewed interest in Adventist history and should raise many questions to discuss in the coming years, especially as we mark the centenary of Ellen White's death next year.

Jonathan M. Butler authors the first chapter with a portrait of Ellen White and gives remarkable insights into the historical facts of White's career as he analyzes the relationship between culture and her achievements in a Victorian world. At times, however, I find he overreaches in his conclusions, as if White purposefully accomplished all she did and set out from the beginning to do so, even more so once her husband, James, had died. Nonetheless, the chapter offers a valuable assessment of the interplay between cultural influence and White's achievements.

Ann Taves' chapter on Ellen White's early visionary experiences offers a summary of the subject provided in an earlier publication, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience*.<sup>3</sup> Taves argues that White's early visions and experience are best understood as part of the Methodist "shout" tradition and the charismatic context in which she lived. As such, she claims that White participated in the early enthusiasm and fanaticism she later renounced and also asserts that official Adventist publications downplayed her early experiences in favor of a more acceptable description of that early history. She also explains how early Adventist history typifies the experience of new religious movements that follow a set trajectory from charismatic experiences to tem-

### The second 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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perate and ultimately more formal expressions of religious life.

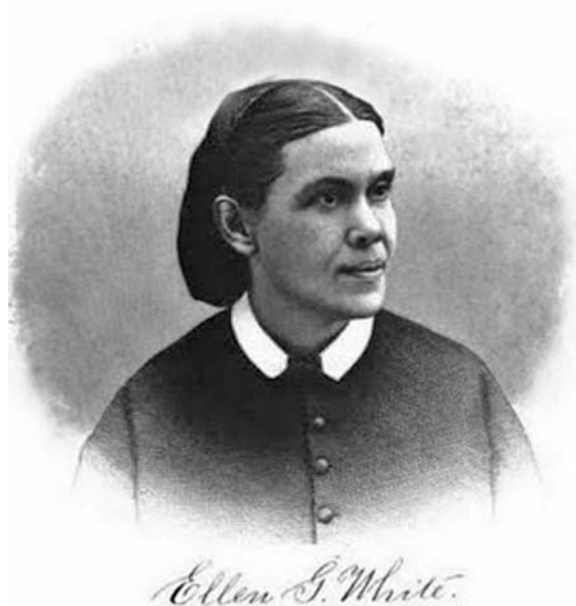
In the third chapter, Graeme Sharrock gives an insightful analysis and description of Ellen White's use of testimonies as a method of communication and exhortation to believers. His structural analysis of the testimony genre is well done and provides a good basis for further study of her testimonies. Ron Graybill's chapter on White as a prophet provides a context for her prophetic gift and explores the manifestation of her gift within her family setting and relationships, and how this gift came to be accepted as a divine manifestation among Adventists.

In Arthur Patrick's chapter on Ellen White as an author, we find an excellent discussion of the issues related to the preparation of her books, with the help of her literary assistants. The long-standing issues of plagiarism and the level of involvement of her assistants in the preparation of her books are well addressed. Patrick offers a candid, honest and fair evaluation of the issues surrounding White's use of other authors and how knowledge of this practice has affected Adventists for generations.

An aspect of White's ministry seldom addressed before is Terrie Aamodt's chapter on White as a public speaker. This chapter highlights how White became a more prominent speaker in Adventism after her husband became ill and how her niece, Mary Clough, helped to publicize her appointments. White was also the builder of many Adventist institutions, as explained by Floyd Greenleaf and

Jerry Moon. Both authors present good evidence to support the case that she played a major role in the development of the Adventist publishing ministry, the organization of the denomination and the development of the health and education branches of the church. Without her determined support to these institutions, the Adventist church would likely not be where it is today.

Fritz Guy's analysis of Ellen White's theology is affirming of her contributions to Adventist thought within her cultural, historical and biographical context. Guy is honest about her personal limitations, that she was more a prophet and pastor who exhorts and encourages people than a theologian who explains and interprets the faith. Nonetheless, White's theological contributions are still relevant today. This same aspect of



White's theology is also emphasized in Bert Haloviak's discussion of her practical theology. Here her functional role as pastor of a community of faith sought to encourage believers in their walk with God and the development of Christian character during the various periods of Adventist growth.

Although many of the insights are not new and can be found in other earlier publications like *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*<sup>4</sup> and *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*,<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Butler's chapter on the Second Coming highlights in a fresh way the tension in Ellen White's writings and Adventist theology

between the expectation of an imminent return of Christ and having to live with and adapt to an ever-extending delay. Butler's historical and sociological portrait of Adventist eschatology is incisive, challenging, and at times too satirical to my liking. Yet I believe his conclusion that the delay of the Second Coming has become the most defining experience of Adventist theology and life is to be taken seriously.

When it comes to White's writings on science and medicine, Ron Numbers and Rennie Schoepflin examine the historical context and sources of her statements on health reform, sexuality, and science. Much of this chapter recapitulates what has previously been published in *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*.<sup>6</sup> Doug Morgan's essay on White's social thought addresses the issues and the interplay of her theology in relationship with other movements in her time. Her approach to social issues demonstrated the interaction of her pragmatic approach to these issues in tension with her idealism and premillennialist expectation of the soon return of Christ. Next, Ben McArthur provides the historical and cultural context for Ellen White's influence on the Adventist relationship to culture. He assesses her counsels on behavior and lifestyle and offers an honest look at the slow disregard her specific counsels have received during the last couple generations while still trying to uphold her guiding principles.

In the chapter on war, slavery and race, Eric Anderson suggests that Ellen White approached this issue also from a pragmatist perspective given her dominant belief in the imminent return of Christ, focusing on current and immediate responsibilities rather than distant prospects, and thus perhaps leaving an ambiguous legacy regarding race and intercultural relations. Laura Vance's study of White's thought on the role of women in the home, church and society highlights the uneven support she gave to many issues impacting the lives of women, but also affirmed the need for women to be involved in all aspects of the church's work. Joe Willey's brief chapter on

White's death and burial is the one that surprised me the most. Before reading this chapter I thought I knew most anything about Ellen White. I was humbled to find out that there are unknown things and anecdotes about Ellen White that will surprise the most knowledgeable among us. I won't spoil the content of this chapter by revealing its fascinating facts.

The last two chapters address how people have perceived Ellen White and her writings before and since her death. Paul McGraw and Gil Valentine provide a stimulating appraisal of her legacy among Adventists and how her writings came to be viewed as inerrant and infallible in spite of an official position to the contrary. Gary Land ends the book with an excellent analysis of the historical context of the various biographies that have been written about Ellen White.

I appreciated reading this book and found it engaging. However, this is not a common book about Ellen White, of the kind that would be published by an Adventist press. And while the content and analyses it provides will likely upset many believers in Ellen White's prophetic ministry, it is nonetheless a valuable assessment of her ministry and writings to provide the basis for further conversations about her enduring relevancy for Seventh-day Adventists. The chapters are not all evenly written or as challenging, and some are needlessly caricaturing Ellen White and her world. All this is to be expected of a book of essays. I also found the use of sources uneven and disappointing in many chapters where references are missing, or incomplete, or simply inaccurate. But beyond these technical matters, a few overarching themes and ideas about Ellen White's writings and influence stand out in my mind after reading this book.

First of all, I learn from these essays that Ellen White was a pragmatic woman, intent on guiding her church and people to prepare themselves for the imminent return of Christ. Her pragmatism, often overriding her idealism

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and long-term foresight, was in constant conversation with her ardent premillennialist convictions. Thus what often influenced her counsels regarding an issue was her belief that time was very short, that Jesus would return very soon, and that therefore one did not need to create needless tension in society or in the church to prove or push an idealism that would not be needed anyway in the short run. Thus she could counsel accommodation for segregation of the races in the south in the 1890s, or accommodation with Sunday-law advocates of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, or call for the involvement of women in all aspects of church and society without joining the suffrage movement. Inasmuch as the imminent return of Christ was an overwhelming motif in her ministry and in the practical guidance she provided the young Adventist church, on the other hand, the current delay of the Second Coming is causing Adventists to rethink and readjust their responses to various issues that were not foreseen and planned for. Now Adventists have to live and wrestle with the results of temporary accommodations that have *de facto* become permanent.

Ellen White's books are the most cherished legacy of her ministry, yet how she wrote and prepared her books remains a constant matter of conversation and criticism. Regardless of the fact that Ellen White claimed not to have read any other authors on health reform or various theological views before she wrote about her own views on these subjects, historians tend to accept the genuineness of this claim less and less. As more and more evidence mounts regarding the similarity of her views to that of other authors, her claim that she received these views directly from God is for many people becoming harder to believe. If this issue of plagiarism remains a complicated one for the Adventist church today, it may be in part because Adventists have not been totally forthright in acknowledging her dependence on other authors. Perhaps a more transparent explanation of how Ellen White composed her books would help to

dispel accusations of plagiarism, but at the same time this would likely require a reinterpretation of how her inspiration is understood and how her authority is perceived.

**M**any of the essays in this book support the overall idea that over a seventy-year ministry Ellen White changed, matured and developed her understanding of various subjects. Not that she intended or set out to do this, but a very long life and ministry, the practical nature of her ministry, and the ever-expanding access to so many of her writings lead many historians to conclude that as Ellen White clarified some concepts and teachings in her later years, she abandoned others. It is therefore a constant challenge to adequately interpret her writings, to place them in context and to seek a better understanding of the practical principles she sought to instill for a church that is now vastly different from the one she left.

In conclusion, I will echo Jon Paulien's comments in *Ministry* (May 2014)<sup>7</sup> that this book will not please everyone and may in fact offend some readers. Many American history enthusiasts will recall John Adams' quip to a jury in Boston in 1770: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."<sup>8</sup> Any interpretive work about an author or church leader such as Ellen White is bound to combine historical facts with ideas and opinions, and in the end present a portrait of this person that may more or less resemble the reality. Ellen White has now been dead for almost one hundred years and her legacy is just beginning to be studied by non-Adventist scholars. What they will find is likely to be more or less different than what Adventists are familiar or comfortable with. In the end, though, we hope that the historical facts of her life and ministry will be related accurately without the filters of "our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passion." But such a call for integrity and hon-



esty in the analysis of Ellen White's contributions is also the responsibility of Adventist historians. This work I believe falls in that category and will stimulate further conversations about Ellen White's legacy and role within Adventism and I am grateful that scholars outside the Adventist tradition are now willing to look at Ellen White and her contributions to American religious history. ■

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7. Paulien, Jon, "Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet," *Ministry*, May (2014), 28.
8. See McCulloch, David, *John Adams* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 68.

**Feedback** → continued from page 6...

effectively relate to soldiers, patients and clergy from other denominations. I am indebted to those three instructors who not only challenged me, but led me through the turmoil of those challenges to a solid foundation for my belief in the role and function of the Bible. It should be noted that without the accreditation of the Seminary, I would never have been allowed to become a federal chaplain.

I had very limited contact with Dr. Vick as he was away at Oxford for a major part of the time that I was a Seminary student. In my opinion, as Dr. Weiss says, orthodoxy was not his problem. He probably was more conservative than he was understood to be. Rather I saw him as communicating on a language level that was above that of which many of the Seminary students were comfortable. Yes, he probably felt that the words he used had nuances that were important. Those nuances were probably not well understood by many of the students and were therefore subject to confusion.

I agree that the attitude of incoming students played a major role in how they adjusted to the Seminary. I am reminded of a student who sat with me in a class with Dr. Horn. He shared with me that he was getting nothing from this class that would be of value in his future ministry. As a result, he asked his conference president to allow him to leave the Seminary and enter "real ministry" of converting people to Christ. I was dumbfounded that he found nothing of value in Dr. Horn's class. He left that Seminary at the end of the term as his wish was granted.

GREGORY MATTHEWS  
*Longmont, Colorado*

**Editor's note:** Gregory Matthews has just retired a second time with fifty years of service to God (The SDA Church) and country. This service had included twenty-plus years in the U.S. Army and service as a VA chaplain.

**Correction:** The image of Siegfried Horn that accompanied Herold Weiss' article about the Seminary showed a contemporary man by the same name, not the Siegfried Horn who taught at Andrews University in the 1960s.

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**Mercy** → continued on page 21...

At the heart of the vision that is Loma Linda University, health ministry is not about making money or establishing one's reputation. Instead, it calls for risking one's own self, caring for the bodies of others; giving your bodies as "sacraments of mercy." It is a very intimate, messy, and mysterious thing. It is sacred.<sup>6</sup>

Graduates, family members and friends of graduates, church family members: there are too many widows gathering sticks at the gates of our cities. They cannot find justice there, so they gather what they can, preparing for their last meager meal. They do not have access to our health care system. We probably will never meet them if we aren't intentional about it. But those living in the tradition of the prophets—in the tradition of Jesus and in the tradition of Loma Linda—must go to the gates of our cities and meet the widows, offering life-altering words and death-defying actions.

The last book of the Christian scriptures gives a vision of a world made new: a place where tears are wiped away; a place where "death [is] no more"; a place where "mourning and crying and pain" are no more; a place where everything is brand new and all the nations are healed (Rev. 21:4–5, 22:2). These too are life-altering words, part of the vision that has shaped this university and this church from its very first day of classes and worship services over a century ago.

This is a community with people willing to risk their lives by looking at the powers of chaos and disease and death and courageously say, "No!" This is a community of people placing their own bodies between the healthy and the hurting, making of their bodies "sacraments of mercy."

Jesus said, "This do, in remembrance of me." Amen. ■

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Union at Berkeley, and a master's from Andrews University. Her recent publications include "The Book of Revelation" in *The Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, Joel Green, ed. (Baker Academic, 2011), and *Signs to Life: Reading and Responding to John's Gospel* (Signs Publishing, 2013).

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3. Bovon, François, "Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke" 1:1–9:50, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 268–270.
4. For additional connections between these stories see Green, Joel B., *The Gospel of Luke (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 289–293.
5. Spence, Sterling, "The Restless Pilgrimage: Where the Community and the Christian Collide" (presentation of bachelor of science thesis, La Sierra University, Matheson Hall Riverside, CA, 2013), 90.
6. The second baccalaureate service, held at 11:45 a.m. on the same day, at Loma Linda University included these words reflecting the students present:

*And I am thinking of this year's graduates—those graduating in the School of Nursing and the School of Behavioral Health and the School of Religion. As we honor our nursing graduates who are often our first responders, those we most often think of as rushing toward the chaos—how grateful we are for you, we also remember that there are other kinds of wounds and needs and fears, not all are visible from the outside. These are cared for by a variety of healers: counselors, family sciences specialists, psychologists, social workers, theologians, and ethicists. At the heart of the vision that is Loma Linda University, health ministry is not about making money or establishing one's reputation. Instead, it calls for risking one's own self, caring for the bodies of others; giving your bodies as "sacraments of mercy." It is a very intimate, messy, and mysterious thing. It is sacred.*

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