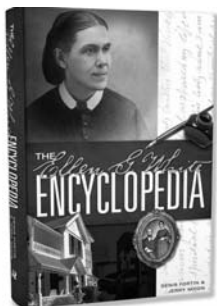


The Hedgehog, the Fox, and Ellen G. White: A Review

BY JONATHAN BUTLER AND RONALD L. NUMBERS

The first of two reviews of:



The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia, Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013)

The 1,465-page hardcover edition of the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* weighs 3.4 pounds; it is hefty enough to serve as a bookend in any library alongside the Ellen White books and other SDA selections; and it represents another impressive Adventist history offering from the Review and Herald Publishing Association. The front cover displays a profile of the forty-something year-old prophet that could be the most flattering image ever taken of her, and this copy is actually an engraved version of it that flatters her even more. Though the portrait dates from around 1875, it reflects the fashion of the 1840s, when she was a teenager. Her hair, meticulously combed against her scalp, parted razor-perfect in the middle, and gathered in a loose bun in the back framed a wide face and a dreamy, ethereal expression. Early Victorian women's fashion favored an open, expansive face through which an unblemished character could reveal itself; it was fashionable to look like White did in this photo, and it was even the fashion for her to exude spirituality. If a picture on the cover of this book is worth the roughly two million words inside, the designer picked the right picture. For on page after page of the *Encyclopedia*, the face of the prophet that emerges is less like that of a candid photo than an artist's rendering, less raw realism than an affected idealism, less earth than heaven.¹

Casting about in this volume—as one tends to do with an encyclopedia rather than reading it straight through from beginning to end—anyone interested in the Seventh-day Adventist past, or White's crucial part in it, will find it a surprising-

ly good read. The lengthy, substantive essays that begin the volume will hold the attention of Adventist readers, and so will the shorter, informative, biographical, and topical entries that make up the bulk of the book. The serious reader, however, will soon detect that this is very much an *in-house* study of White, written by Adventists and for Adventists. In fact, by *in-house* we mean the product not so much of Adventist academia as a whole but a segment of it represented by the Adventist Theological Seminary and its graduates. This is not the prophet as she was so much as the prophet as the *Encyclopedia* wants her to be. That does not mean it should be relegated to a decorative bookend. Buy the book, but “let the buyer beware.” Read the book, but read it critically.

That said, in the preface of *Encyclopedia*, the editors sound more like historians than believers when they declare their purpose for the book: “Beyond providing ready access to much information about Ellen White, we hope that by our systematizing present knowledge this work will stimulate a new wave of interest in and research about this influential leader and writer of the nineteenth century” (14). In an interview for *Focus: The Andrews University Magazine*, however, the *Encyclopedia* editors indicate that the Adventist prophet requires special handling by historians; she is not just another historical figure. Though they wanted to be “honest and candid,” they approached her “from a faith-based perspective.” Selecting authors that “fit our philosophy,” they hoped to be “truthful” and “non-apologetic as far as possible.” But White was “inspired of God.” This meant that the *Ency-*

lopedia needed to adopt a certain “tone” that was “first of all, friendly toward” her. For the contributors to this landmark book, then, White may be an “influential leader and writer of the nineteenth century,” but she is also exponentially more than that. They are not naïve enough to try to prove this as historians; they believe in her as a prophet as a matter of fact. And this affects the way they write history. As a result, the *Encyclopedia* certainly will not undercut belief, or even alter it all that much, but will instead buttress belief in the Ellen White we have always known but would like to have known better.

The in-house nature of *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* begins with its co-editors, Denis Fortin, former dean and professor of theology, and Jerry Moon, a church historian, both of them teaching at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary at Andrews University. Altogether there are 182 contributors to the *Encyclopedia*, and they generally fit a profile. By and large, they are denominational teachers and administrators, including employees of the Ellen G. White Estate. A number of them were Seminary-trained at Andrews University, mostly students of George Knight. The volume is dedicated to Roger W. Coon (a shirt-tail relative of Ronald Numbers) who devoted much of his career to writing on the life of Ellen White. But the *Encyclopedia* channels the spirit of Knight, a professor of education at Andrews University who belatedly migrated into the field of church history, writing extensively on Adventist history. The *Encyclopedia* was, in fact, his brainchild back in the late 1990s, but his retirement limited him to a contributing editor role for the volume. Only thirteen of the contributors were trained as historians at secular universities. Only one of them is a non-SDA, a deceased Advent Christian scholar.

What results, then, is a book that adopts the *vener* of the historian; it *looks* like history. But it is not the kind of history we expect to read about Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln or Eleanor Roosevelt. In the jargon of biblical scholarship, it is not so much the historical-critical method at work but the historical-*non-critical* method. There are some notable exceptions to this: historians who write entries that all the contributors might have done well to emulate. To mention just a few examples among many: Brian Strayer on the “French Revolution” (one among twenty-one essays by him); Douglas Morgan on the “United States in Prophecy” or the “Civil War”; Dennis Pettibone on “Church and State”; Michael Campbell (who writes

most of the unsigned biographical entries) on “Ecstatic Experiences”; Gary Land on the “Holy Flesh Movement”; Kit Watts on “Women’s Issues”; Benjamin McArthur on “Games and Sports”; and Jo Ann Davidson (a biblical scholar trained at Andrews) on “Beauty.” To point out that the *Encyclopedia* is believer’s history by no means discredits it as a whole. This volume makes a valuable contribution to Adventist studies and particularly the study of Ellen White. The editors of *Encyclopedia* and its contributors deserve to be congratulated for a book that will appeal, within Adventism, to a popular audience but serve its academics less well. It needs, however, to be understood for what it is and for what it chooses not to be.

From 1970 to the early 1980s, Seventh-day Adventists underwent a historiographical revolution that left them with a very different Ellen White in its wake from what the church had long known. Since that major shift, played out frequently in the pages of *Spectrum*, a new apologetics has sought to pick up the pieces. The old apologetics of F. D. Nichol and LeRoy Froom, which had defended the church against outside critics, was no longer adequate in the face of historical challenges within the church. Most notably seen in the prolific historical writings of Knight, along with several of his more industrious students, the new apologists have been heavily influenced by the earlier revisionism, whether or not they acknowledge it. Where the new apologists incorporate the revisionist history in their arguments, they typically conceal their indebtedness; when they are faulting the revisionists, they identify whom they have in mind.

They spin the revisionist history, however, for their own purposes. As long as history bolsters faith, it is useful. But when history—or a particular historian—establishes a critical distance from White, then that is going too far. By and large, the *Encyclopedia* therefore finds itself far less comfortable with the revisionist history of the 1970s and early 80s (Numbers, Donald McAdams, Walter Rea) than in the new apologetics since then (Knight, Moon, Campbell, Woodrow Whidden). In the contributors chosen to write the entries, and in the way the entries are written, the *Encyclopedia* tends to concede as little as possible to the revisionist history, ignores as much as possible, and reacts negatively to the rest.

Nowhere in the *Encyclopedia* is the apologetic stance more conspicuous—to the point of caricature—than in the essay by Jud Lake and Moon on “Current Science and Ellen

White: Twelve Controversial Statements" (214–240). Instead of their labored, even tortured, efforts to rescue White from some serious misstatements, they would do better to concede that *she was at times wrong*. For supporting evidence of White's inspiration, Lake and Moon rely heavily on Don McMahon, a physician, and Leonard Brand, a biologist, for their view of how the prophet drew on her environment (236–37, notes 19, 21 and 29). In a truly bizarre application of probability theory to White's statements, McMahon showed that there was only one chance in 1.4 times 10^{25} (for the mathematically challenged, that's 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 or ten septillion) that White could have chosen her health-reform message so presciently—which clearly demonstrated her divine inspiration. To help readers visualize this, McMahon abandoned all connection with reality and said this probability was like a chicken plucking a grain of rice out of a pile of wheat that would cover Australia to a depth of fifty miles.

Unfortunately for his illustration, if every distinct health-reform teaching were represented by a grain of wheat, together they wouldn't even fill a tea cup much less cover Australia or the U.S. fifty miles deep.² The other entries on medicine and science suffer from many of the same flaws as the Lake-Moon essay: a shocking ignorance of historical context, mistakes aplenty, and often an apologetic tone. A notable exception is Warren H. Johns' excellent article on biblical chronology.

The *Encyclopedia* that results from the new apologetics brings to mind the fragment from an ancient Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Philosopher Isaiah Berlin divided a number of writers and thinkers into these two categories, either foxes or hedgehogs. Foxes might include Aristotle, Erasmus, Shakespeare or Joyce; hedgehogs would be Plato, Dante, Pascal or Proust. (Butler may be more of a hedgehog and Numbers more like the fox, but of course, as historians, we want to be both.) Berlin then turned to Tolstoy, who he could not comfortably label as either one. He concluded that Tolstoy possessed the talent of a fox, which accumulated many little things, but the Russian novelist believed that he ought to be a hedgehog, driven by the big idea. In a way, the *Encyclopedia* seems caught in Tolstoy's dilemma. It gathers a great deal of information and wants to do so as historians do it. But at the same time, it believes in the one big thing—that Ellen White is the one true prophet for our time—so that nothing the fox gathers

should disturb the hedgehog's vision. Reading through the *Encyclopedia*, one sees impressively industrious foxes at work. But behind it all lurks a hedgehog that "knows one big thing."

Poring over the *Encyclopedia*, the foxes will find many tidbits of information to interest them. Reading Knight, for example, one learns that White wrote mostly letters, articles, and sermons; her staff turned them into books. In effect, then, all of her books were compilations (126). She wrote 50,000 pages of letters. E. S. Ballenger rejected the inspiration of White's *Testimonies* because she wrote that there were forty rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium when there were actually thirty-eight (217). White's paternal grandfather was named "Daniel," the namesake of the biblical figure after whom her visions were patterned (399). The twenty-seven-year-old Anna Phillips, a self-proclaimed prophet who believed she was to be White's successor, was adopted by Jesse Rice, who was thirty-five (499). White is credited with the saying that you should live "as though you had 1,000 years to live, and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow." But Shaker prophet Ann Lee actually made that remark (609). The notorious "Z File," which consisted of about one hundred letters focusing on "the sins of erring leaders," tantalized researchers for decades because they were off-limits to them. They have now been released into White's general correspondence and are well represented in *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce* (1989), one of White's more popular compilations (1295).

These factoids dug up by the foxes may have broader implications for the hedgehogs. Why did Harmon experience visions so similar to those of the prophet Daniel? Were there factors in her cultural and religious background, besides the pervasive influence of the Bible, that prompted her visions? How typical was Ballenger in holding White to such specificity in her *Testimonies*? Where did he get his view of inspiration, and was White at all responsible for his ideas? How hands-on was White in the literary production of her own books? Was she herself more the hedgehog than the fox when it came to her publications? Anna Phillips Rice apparently did not measure up as a successor to White, but why was it that no one else seemed to qualify, according to White? When she said that, after her death, "my writings will constantly speak... as long as time shall last," she clearly intended to silence any future prophetic voices in the church. But why? Historians—biog-

raphers—face the huge challenge of sorting through countless facts and organizing them into an interpretive scheme that fits these facts.

Ultimately, the fox and the hedgehog need to get along. The “one big thing” that interests the interpretive hedgehog about White is this: how *human* was she? This single overarching question, however, subdivides into any one of three different questions. First, how did her *context* affect her as a prophet? Second, what sort of *change* occurred in her life and writings? And finally, in what ways did she possess an exemplary or flawed *character*? The three C’s—context, change, and character—cannot be discreetly separated from one another. Whatever aspect of White’s life becomes the focus, they inevitably interweave themselves. But how the historian deals with them—how the *Encyclopedia* does—tells us as much about White’s biographers as it does about White herself.

With regard to context, most of the *Encyclopedia* writers fail to demonstrate White’s immersion in her milieu. They are well-versed in her writings but far less conversant with the history of her era. Ironically, they stand too close to the person to see her clearly. There is a rich and voluminous historical literature on White’s world. But throughout much of the *Encyclopedia*, nineteenth-century American society and culture, technology and science, morals and religion receive, for the most part, only the dilettante’s passing glance, if any notice at all. It is as if the *Encyclopedia* writers took the train across America, with White on the seat next to them, but only viewed the land—her land—out a small window, whizzing by.

Instead of this kind of historical “tourism,” the *Encyclopedia* needed the in-depth expertise of more professionally trained historians. Why were so many of them excluded from the project and even left out of the recommendations for “further reading”? In his bibliographical essay, Burt identifies the most obscure historical sources written by Adventists, but seems unaware of the non-Adventist scholarship on White, such as Ann Taves on White’s visions, Laura Vance on the

prophet and gender, Paul Conkin on her cultural importance, David Holland on her continuing revelations relative to a closed canon, and Robert Fuller on White and the body. There are historians at the margins of Adventism, or beyond it, who seem ostracized from the volume despite major contributions to Adventist historiography. To ask about them alphabetically, whether as writers or as reading recommendations, where is Eric Anderson, Roy Branson, Ronald Graybill, Bert Haloviak, Ingemar Lindén, Donald McAdams, William Peterson, Rennie Schoepflin, Graeme Sharrock—or Butler and Numbers? F. D. Nichol, though seriously dated, is constantly cited. Graybill, in contrast, seems to have been outlived by Arthur White. It is hard not to infer an *ad hominem* element in this. There may be a “political correctness” here that the editors needed to consider. But it may also be past time, academically speaking, for the “shut door” to crack open and let in more of the outside world.

When the historians go missing, it changes the kind of history that gets written. On the critical Shut Door issue, for example, White’s Camden vision showed that the prophet, as late as 1851, had taught that the door of salvation was shut for non-Millerite Christians, and she based this on a vision. The White Estate view is that the written version of this Camden vision was spurious, but the best history on it upholds the genuineness of the document. The *Encyclopedia* sides with the White Estate.

On the important matter of White’s use of nineteenth century historians, the *Encyclopedia* leaves the question to a biblical scholar. Michael Hasel, a professor of Near Eastern studies, unsuccessfully takes on Donald McAdams, a European historian, who found that White had made “errors in historical detail regarding John Huss” (868). Here Hasel defends White, who happily left the details of history to the foxes; she saw herself as a hedgehog with a grand vision of the Great Controversy.

The second “C”—change—can be seen as change for the better; it can also be construed as problematic. While development in the

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prophet's life and writings may be lauded as "progressive revelation," it also may be faulted as inconsistency and self-contradiction. She once said this; now she says that. Here's a quotation on the law, but there is one on grace. At first she says to build the Health Reform Institute; then she says to tear it down. She "saw" a Chicago building, and it never existed. One hedgehog may argue for an open-minded prophet who serves as an open-ended source of revelation. Another hedgehog may insist on a tradition-bound prophet who testifies to the changeless nature of God's truth. Historians, who are used to dealing with real human beings, expect to dig from the foxholes of information evidence of change, even when it means change for the worse to some.

Not surprisingly, the writers of this *Encyclopedia* are more comfortable with consistency than contradiction in their prophet. Where they see change, they want to view it as positive development. Based on his prolific writings elsewhere, Whidden proves ideally suited to write entries on the humanity of Christ and the plan of salvation. But the hedgehog in Whidden minimizes the change regarding White's view of Christ's humanity. In fact, he concludes, "There appear to be no significant development factors in her understanding of the subject. Her major contributions were evident right from the beginning" (693). The White quotations on Christology that he uses to support his thesis, however, turn out to belie it. Nearly all her best written statements on the nature of Christ come from the 1890s. But Whidden still takes White's word for the fact that on Christology and salvation she had undergone no significant change in her thinking, writing, or preaching. He believes, then, that in the 1850s she had never been more law-oriented than she was in the 1890s; the early White had certainly not been legalistic in contrast to the later White. Rather, throughout her life, she had consistently preached—*according to her*—the "matchless charms of Christ." Where Whidden does admit to development in her thought on salvation, he explains that this is not from "error to truth," but a move "from simple, more childlike expressions of truth to greater clarity and sophistication."³

On White's writing generally, Knight acknowledges development in a way Whidden is reluctant to do, but he prefers the later White to the earlier one, where Whidden tends to see just one White. In the final analysis, however, there is little difference between Knight and Whidden. Both of them idealize the prophet, which is true for most of the *Encyclopedia* writers. In this case, that means White's

own characterizations of her theology or writings are taken at face value. Neither historian ever really cross-examines her critically, disagrees with her, or finds fault with her. One key reason that Knight favors White's later writing is because she herself does. "*The Great Controversy* rivals *The Desire of Ages* as being Ellen White's most important work," Knight believes. "Ellen White said that she appreciated it 'above silver and gold'" (126). Despite Knight's preference for these works—and White's, too—why should they be preferred to her earlier writings? In *Seeking a Sanctuary*, Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart take the opposite view. They recognize that, in the 1890s, "a much more sophisticated writer appears, concerned not with narrative details but with moral exhortation." They favor her earliest work, however, which "shows an intense awareness of the dramatic potential of narrative that is obscured by the sentimental tone of her later works."⁴ The earlier work, too, is clearly more her own than her later writing is.

The final "C"—character—may be the most sensitive and potentially tendentious of the three C's. Nearly four decades ago, in his preface to *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, Numbers took issue with Arthur White on whether a historian could assume, before beginning research on the visionary health reformer, that White "as a sincere, dedicated Christian and a prophet... would not and did not falsify."⁵ Numbers did not dispute that this could be the case. But he could not presuppose it *before* researching her life. He could only conclude it *after* he had done his work. But this created quite an uproar at the time. However iconic the figure, however great the contribution, however many lives the person has touched for the good, we still need to know what sort of person he or she was when the public was not looking—when the fellow citizens or fellow church members had their backs turned. What kind of parent was the historical figure, or spouse, or sibling, or stranger? How did the private life correspond with the public rhetoric, the inner spirituality to the sermon preached? Historians want to know, not because they are unpatriotic, or misanthropic, or faithless, but because they are *historians*.

To press the character question is perhaps the most difficult of the C's for the *Encyclopedia* writers because White is not just a religious icon for Seventh-day Adventists but a family member, not only a prophet but also a spiritual mother. Surgeons should not operate on a family member; they are too close emotionally to function at the highest level professionally. It may be just as tough for the historian

to write a good biography of a family member, and in a sense, the vast majority of these *Encyclopedia* writers are relatives of the prophet. If you read the *Encyclopedia* carefully, you will look in vain for a single instance when Ellen White was wrong about anything. The editorial deletions on the Shut Door in no way reflected on her integrity. She had not read Larkin Coles on health before writing out her own vision on the subject, just as she insisted. (In fact, it does not merit comment in the *Encyclopedia*.) In her *Testimonies*, she had never misread a situation or maligned a person without warrant. Because God had asked her to deliver critical *Testimonies*, the recipients had occasionally rejected her; they had blamed the messenger. Her critics had never been right about her. Her marital problems with James White had been his fault, not hers. She had no shortcomings as a mother, though James had been a problem for his son Edson. Her claims as a writer were above reproach. D. M. Canright and Fanny Bolton had been all wrong about her literary practices. The Battle Creek physicians—John Harvey Kellogg in particular—had been harsh, politically motivated skeptics. In short, she was never on the wrong side of a doctrinal issue, a personal quarrel, a political squabble, or an institutional struggle.

For the writers and editors of this *Encyclopedia*, that lovely, dreamy engraving of her from the 1870s—the Victorian woman of unblemished character—shines through on every page because that is the reality for them. They stand so close to her that they cannot see the blemishes; she is just too personally and spiritually compelling. The foxes find what the hedgehog wants them to find. ■

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