

Not Talking To Ourselves Any More: *Adventists, Ellen White, and the Scholars* | BY ERIC ANDERSON AND BEN MCARTHUR



A New York bakery came up with a classic advertising campaign a few years ago. Using a poster adorned with a smiling Asian man, the bakery's ads bluntly declared: "You don't have to be Jewish to like Levy's real Jewish rye." Two recent events carry a similar message for Seventh-day Adventists: "You don't have to be an Adventist to be interested in Ellen G. White."

Without any help from Adventist publicists or evangelists, *Smithsonian Magazine* put the Adventist prophet on a list of the "one hundred most significant Americans of all time." Not "notable American women," mind you, or "important religious leaders," but the one hundred most sig-

nificant Americans of all time.

About the same time, a major university press published a well-received scholarly study entitled *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*. "She ranks as one of the most gifted and influential religious leaders in American history," declares Oxford University Press. The authors are a disparate lot, including Adventists, non-Adventist Christians, ex-Adventists, and others who might be described as "none of the above." The Adventist contributors are not heretics or rebels, by the way, but teachers and scholars "in good and regular standing" from Walla Walla University, Andrews University, Southwestern Adventist University, Southern Adventist University, Washington Adventist University, La Sierra University, the General Conference Archives, and Pacific Union College.

The scholars are not interested in either debunking this "American prophet" or defending her. The goal is simply to understand her, to put her into historical context. They are eager to write American history in its full complexity, including individuals and movements that were once dismissed as marginal. Without expecting complete originality or demanding personal impeccability from their biographical subject, they are intrigued by her influence and successful institution-building.

This is an unfamiliar situation. We are used to thinking something like this: "You must be an Adventist to understand Mrs. White. Outsiders will probably be unfair, studying her only to discredit our denomination." We feel vaguely defensive, often holding off any discussion of Ellen White until the final stages in the initiation of a convert. We are not used to communicating with the likes of *Smithsonian Magazine* or Oxford University Press.

We tentatively celebrate the new attention, of course, but we are also uneasy. Will we lose control of the discussion of Ellen White and our history if well-informed outsiders start asking questions and venturing conclusions?

Our situation is comparable to that of Republican Party leaders the day Abraham Lincoln died. “Now he belongs to the ages,” murmured a member of Lincoln’s cabinet as the President breathed his last. As Lincoln moved from live politician to martyred statesman, his party colleagues only gradually learned what “belonging to the ages” entailed. They might resolve to preserve his memory and be faithful to his teachings but they could no longer control his name and image. Everybody could become involved in deciding Lincoln’s legacy—even people who did not vote for him or, eventually, folks who lived long after.

Something similar happened when the United States declared an official holiday in honor of Martin Luther King. Creating the holiday was a dramatic way of saying “This man is an American hero.” In other words, neither the King family nor certain kinds of Christians nor black people in general controlled the agenda. All sorts of people could now cite his words and interpret his achievements. You did not have to be a victim of segregation to appreciate him.

Seventh-day Adventists should not be afraid of wider discussion of Ellen White—any more than Americans should fret about Democrats quoting Lincoln or former racists citing King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Even if readers of *Ellen Harmon White* or *Smithsonian Magazine* don’t understand “the year/day principle,” it is still a great victory, is it not, to have them saying “What a remarkable woman! Why didn’t we know this before?” Their reaction suggests that we have stopped talking to ourselves.

In short, the neutral, objective, non-evangelistic approach of scholars can be useful to Adventists. These academics speak a specialized language, with an emphasis on certain kinds of evidence and specific, focused arguments. Even the believers among them do not, when writing as scholars, explain historical events by invoking providence or divine inspiration.

But then neither does an Adventist physician writing a scientific article on the dangers of smoking or an Adventist geologist employing conventional periodization to classify dinosaur bones. Though the writers of *Ellen Harmon White* use secular language, they do not thereby affirm that Ellen White was uninspired or that divine revelation is an impossibility.

People notice that it is hard to tell the Adventists from the “non-Adventists,” the believers from the agnostics in this new book—and there is a good reason for that. All of

the contributors “adhere to the most rigorous standards of critical yet appreciative historical inquiry” (as the distinguished Christian historian Grant Wacker put it). That’s the way you move from talking to yourself to engaging the wider world. That’s why *Ellen Harmon White* is published by Oxford University Press rather than Pacific Press.

Academic history has already broadened our understanding of Ellen White. Some Adventists have (at last) learned to be more careful about claiming uniqueness or perfection for her work. If *Ellen Harmon White* is a good indication of the direction of future discussion, we will be hearing much more about Ellen White as speaker, as practical theologian, and as apocalyptic preacher. The academic approach has helped us better understand the use and reception of her testimonies and her complex interaction with denominational leadership. Even the most skeptical historian cannot help but notice that people “who adopted her recommended life style” live “substantially longer and healthier lives.”

We scholars never have the last word in matters of faith, of course. We ought to recognize the limitations of our documents and footnotes and cautious hypotheses. We should admit that *as scholars* we cannot explain the power of her words to change people’s behavior. But all Adventists have reason to celebrate the new “outside” interest in our history.

You don’t have to be Adventist to be interested in Ellen G. White. ■

Ben McArthur is professor of history at Southern Adventist University. His biography of A. G. Daniells is scheduled to appear from Pacific Press in early 2016.



Eric Anderson is the Walter C. Utt Professor of History at Pacific Union College. A graduate of Andrews University and the University of Chicago, he has written on a wide range of subjects, including Reconstruction in North Carolina, philanthropy for black education, and Ellen White’s understanding of the Civil War. From 2005 to 2014, he was president of Southwestern Adventist University.

