

“I Have Seen a Better Land”:

Confessions of an Ellen White Biographer | BY TERRIE AAMODT

After her first vision, which she experienced in December 1844 at age seventeen, Ellen White recounted how it included experiencing the Second Advent and entering heaven with Jesus. Then she and the rest of the redeemed followed Jesus to “a table of pure silver ... many miles in length ... [filled with] the fruit of the tree of life, the manna, almonds, figs, pomegranets [sic], grapes, and many other kinds of fruits.” Ellen asked Jesus if she could have some. “He said, not now. Those who eat of the fruit of this land, go back to earth no more. But,” He continued, “in a little while if faithful, you shall both eat of the fruit of the tree of life, and drink of the water of the fountain.” In the meantime, He told her, “you must go back to the earth again, and relate to others, what I have revealed to you.” An angel brought her back “down to this dark world,” as she described it. After this vision, Ellen Harmon could not see the world as others saw it. Her terrestrial surroundings would never seem as beautiful as they had before her vision. “Sometimes I think I cannot stay here any longer, all things of earth look so dreary,” she wrote about a year later. “I feel very lonely



here, for I have seen a better land.”¹

Ellen Harmon White could describe a better land, but how does the historian, and how does the biographer, describe how she got there, and how her first visionary visit to heaven shaped her seventy-year public career? Sometimes I wonder why we even try—surely this task must lie beyond the grasp of ordinary mortals. But with a firm grip on my ordinary mortality, I will describe for you what I have learned about this task. It has become clear that there are things a biographer can do, things she cannot do, and things she must do. Here’s what I mean.

While she can examine and report a prophet’s account of her calling, the biographer cannot describe the mind of God, or the mechanisms by which He selects someone to bear a special message to the world. If explaining aspects of God lies within the reach of human capacity at all, it belongs to the realm of the theologian. Using the tools of the historian—diaries, letters, published books, historical artifacts, public and private documents—the biographer can describe what was said to have happened, what one personage witnessed happening to another, and how people remembered later what happened. To the extent that histor-

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ical tools reveal probable causes and effects, the biographer can analyze why something happened. Even within those parameters, the work of examining what is legitimately available to the biographer is a bit like sanctification—it is the work of a lifetime.

What should shape these toils? Given the significance of Ellen White for the Advent movement, perhaps the biographer should focus exclusively on affirming her prophetic gift. On the other hand, given the amount of time and ink that has been spent on that endeavor for well over a century, perhaps it is the biographer's role to provide a corrective to the hagiographic record, exposing the hidden or suppressed details that would modify or disconfirm earlier accounts. Although the range of choices and approaches may seem bewildering, I maintain that there is only one thing that the biographer can do, and in fact it is what she must do: she must present the person whole.

I spent time thinking about this aspect of the biographer's task during a national academic conference on Ellen White in Portland, Maine, held in October 2009. The proceedings of that conference became the 2014 volume *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, published by Oxford University Press. At the conference, nearly equal numbers of scholars who were connected to the Adventist denomination and scholars who were not, discussed the appropriate way to present the life story of this significant but understudied figure to a general audience of academic historians. Our keynote speaker the first day was Professor Joan Hedrick, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Although she had not studied Ellen White previously, we sought her advice on how to examine and report the life of a prominent nineteenth-century American woman writer and activist. She described the task of telling Stowe's life story in some detail to an audience of conference participants and graduate students from the University of Southern Maine.

At the end of her talk, the first person to

ask a question was Ciro Sepulveda, a history professor from Oakwood University. He inquired, "It's clear from hearing your talk that you have profound admiration for your subject, but how do you deal with the flaws?" At that moment, a certain cohort of the audience was all ears. Hedrick said in reply,

I view them as great complications of the plot, as good material for biographers. And the flaws bring a person into sharp focus—they really do. 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 but I see it as a possibility. I see it as great literary material and sometimes as great didactic material.

That point about seeing the person whole is, I maintain, the distinction between biography and hagiography. It sounds simple and straightforward, doesn't it? Just see the person whole. What does that mean for the biographer? What does it mean for the biographer of Ellen White?

I cannot claim the lofty eminence of Stowe's biographer, but I can describe what the attempt to see Ellen White's life whole looks like approximately one-third of the way through my manuscript. There are many dimensions of her life story that deserve this level of attention, including her injury, her Methodism, her vision for her denomination, and 1844, among others. Here I will explore her circle of her family and her closest friends.

Her Circle—the White Family

As we endeavor to understand Ellen White whole, a crucial part of our understanding comes from her relationships to those closest to her, particularly her own family. Her letters to them provide the richest source of our understanding of her personal life. Her correspondence with her husband, James, reveals the complexity of their relationship. They

were colleagues, partners in the faith. They shared pulpits at countless camp meetings and churches for a couple of decades. They strategized periodicals, books, and publishing. When James spent several weeks on a speaking tour after the birth of their fourth son her letters to him were tender. "You may be assured I miss your little visits in my room," she told him when the baby was three weeks old, "but the thought you are doing the will of God, helps me to bear the loss of your company. . . . In much love, your Ellen." A few days later: "Write often. I am anxious to hear from you." And a few days after that: "I think if you stay until the 27th of November it is plenty long enough. I am very lonely here without you." James replied at one point, "I love my family and nothing but a sense of duty can separate me from them," echoing a refrain he and Ellen both used. But he too was lonely: "O, I do wish you and Bub [the baby, yet unnamed] were here, but in three long weeks I shall see you, Lord will."²

In mid-November, as Ellen regained her strength, she ventured with her four boys on a visit to family friends, Charles and Jane Glover, in the country. It was apparently during this trip that her baby, later named John Herbert, contracted an erysipelas infection, and James hurried home. After three weeks of agonizing illness, the baby hovered near death. In the wee hours of December 14, Ellen was called to his bedside and knew his life was ending. "That was an hour of anguish for me," she wrote. "We watched his feeble, gasping breath, until it ceased, and we felt thankful that his sufferings were ended." Deeply in shock, she did not cry. "I fainted at the funeral," she remembered, "My heart ached as though it would break, yet I could not shed a tear. . . . After we returned from the funeral, my home seemed lonely. I felt reconciled to the will of God, yet despondency gloom settled upon me." As she recounted to a friend a few weeks later, "For weeks I had watched over my suffering child with agonizing feelings which I cannot describe, and at last

I witnessed its death struggle, the closing of its little eyes, but could find no relief by weeping. My heart was full to bursting," she remembered, "but I could not shed a tear. His little coffin was near me in the meeting house. My eye rested upon it with such feelings of loneliness as none but a mother bereft of an infant can feel. I fainted, yet could not weep."³ Ellen White was typically guarded about her personal feelings, making this detailed description of her grief unusual. She did not try to explain it away or find a lesson from suffering. She simply described what she felt. Although many experiences drove her to tears, the deepest wells of her sorrow, after her accident and after the death of her baby, left her dry-eyed in the midst of her emotional devastation. She did not try to explain why the shock of paralyzing grief left her without tears.

John Herbert's death was just the beginning of severe family trials. A few years later, when James slipped into depression after he had the first in a series of strokes in 1865, their relationship became stressed to the point of incompatibility. In the 1870s Ellen arrived at a decision. If "the work" beckoned, and if James was unable to participate, she would go on alone. James would continue to have problems with his health and his emotional state for the rest of his life, some of them famously documented in an exchange of letters between Ellen and her best friend Lucinda Hall in 1876. Yet Ellen flew to his defense in Battle Creek as the aging, increasingly querulous founder sought to retain his influence over church affairs. And she came to understand how best to soothe him when he gave way to depressive thoughts. As James's biographer Gerald Wheeler has noted, "Those who have never battled depression or similar problems cannot grasp what he constantly faced."⁴

In 1880, Ellen, who had known her share of despondency, wrote him a long letter, trying to soothe the paranoid feelings that led him to believe that his family and coworkers were conspiring against him. In this moment of

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stress, we see how she had developed a response to the suspicion and depression she had experienced at various times: "Let us, dear husband, make melody to God in our hearts. Let us not be found accusers of our brethren, for this is the work Satan is engaged in." She reflected the thinking and the discussions she and James had had recently on the character of Christ, as they discussed a series of art prints on the plan of salvation and as she was working on the manuscript that would become *The Desire of Ages*: "Let us talk of Jesus and His matchless love. I feel every day like deeply repenting before God for my hardness of heart, and because my life has not been more in accordance with the life of Christ." She sought a sense of reconciliation with Christ and with her loved ones: "I weep over my own hardness of heart, my life which has not been a correct example to others. Let us bring ourselves into harmony with heaven and we will then be in harmony with our brethren and at peace among ourselves. Let us now, both of us, redeem the time." Her long experience as a Methodist and a Millerite had taught her the importance of honesty and humility in personal relationships even if she, like any other human being, had not always lived up to her ideals. She well knew the role of confession in intimate relationships: "Forgive me for any words of impatience that have escaped my lips, every seeming act of wrong in your sight," she continued in her letter to James.

During the last months of James's life, the couple were reconciled and James was characterized by a sweetness that had eluded him for many years. Dudley Canright, who had experienced his own share of James's wrath, reflected that "I think I never saw Brother White so tender and patient as he was these last few months of his life." A few weeks before his death of malarial fever in 1881, Ellen wrote, "When there was needed a man to move forward in battling for the right, God chose my husband and used him for the upbuilding of His cause." In 1906 as she

described her marriage to James she stated, "He is the best man who ever trod shoe leather."⁵ Why would a biographer, or why would a reader, for that matter, be interested in this story? As we strive to understand what a prophetic calling is, what a prophetic role is, we may be tempted to think that a prophet has some kind of hidden advantage. Shouldn't choices be clearer if you already have a good idea of how the story will turn out? Shouldn't a prophet just *know* how to handle a given situation? To see a person whole, we must understand how she responds to situations of stress. And we must put those moments in the larger context of deep and long-standing relationships. To grasp Ellen White, we must understand her personal, professional, and faith-based relationship with James.

Her Circle—Her Closest Friends

We also learn a great deal about Ellen White by looking at her relationships with her closest friends. It is often lonely being a prophet. White sought companionship, but with the intimacy of friendship also came her close prophetic scrutiny into their lives. She valued the skill and energy of younger associates such as Uriah Smith and J. N. Loughborough, but she worried, sometimes substantively, that their family lives would blunt their commitment to the cause. She also sympathized with their difficulties, however. As the new year 1860 began, she reported sorrowfully on the attempts of family and friends to care for John and Mary Loughborough's only child, Teresa, who was not quite two when she succumbed to tuberculosis. "Oh, how sad the sight—a mother witnessing the last agonies of her loved one, her only child!" she confided in her diary. "We witness the dying struggle. The little eyes are closed, no more to look on earthly things. The little prattling tongue has ceased. This is a dark, dreary world. The whole human family are subject to disease, sorrow, and death."⁶ She wept with the stricken parents and strove to

comfort them as best she could.

Upon reflection, though, she came to believe that Teresa's death was preventable, and that Mary could have spared her daughter's life if she had been less selfish. Four months after the little girl died, Ellen White called John and Mary out for their friendship with Carrie Carpenter, deemed by White as a poor influence. She zeroed in on Mary, saying that she and Carrie were "too closely linked." This "childish" relationship "greatly crippled" John's usefulness to the cause. And then there was Teresa. "I dare not withhold," White told the still-grieving parents, "I was shown the time and the occasion of Teresa, that frail flower, receiving disease when it might have been avoided as well as not." She referred to the fact that while John was away on church business and Mary and her friend Carrie traveled here and there, "You all three [Carrie, Mary, and Teresa] were sleeping in the same bed when Carrie was much diseased. You, Mary, violated the laws of health. Your little plant breathed in a feverish, poisonous atmosphere." As White recounted it, Teresa became ill, prayers were offered, and the little girl improved. But Mary, "without consulting duty, reason, or consequences," took their little girl on another trip. "Exposure again brought on disease which had not been eradicated from the system, and it took a deeper hold of the vitals; the consequence was fatal." Mary's "sickly dependence" on Carrie, White declared, "is a sin."⁷ This was not the first time Ellen White had criticized Mary Loughborough's values and judgment, but in the context of the death of her only child, this letter must have devastated Mary.

Biographers have reported how Ellen White wept at Teresa's deathbed in January and how Mary Loughborough attentively helped Ellen as she gradually recovered from the birth of John Herbert that September, dressing the little boy almost every day, meeting Ellen and her boys when they returned from their visit to the Glovers in November, and mourning the

baby's death with Ellen in December. But when the biographer does not mention the April letter, the story sounds different, and the conclusions are different. Mary's role helping Ellen and the baby in the fall has a different level of poignancy, given what had happened a few months earlier. And, while Ellen's letter to Mary in April, taken in isolation, is harsh in tone toward a grieving mother, the strongest criticisms in her written testimonies typically were directed toward those who caused the vulnerable to suffer. The tone of her April letter to John and Mary Loughborough was in the vein of the criticisms she leveled at men who physically abused their wives or were unfaithful. The survival of the friendship between Ellen and Mary during this difficult year tells us a great deal about both individuals.

Probably Ellen White's most graphic description of crushing personal sorrow is found in her writings just after the death of John Herbert in 1860. On the other hand, she did not speak of devastating disappointment on October 22; rather, she described 1844 as "the happiest year of my life." Why? When she reminisced about 1844, she was not referring to the Disappointment. For her, "1844" did not conjure images of a traumatic, dismal failure, with people waiting outside all day on the 22nd, increasingly shivering with cold as darkness fell, and finally dissolving in tears. Neither did she return in her memory to the fever pitch of anticipation—the thumping heart, the catch in the breath from a sneak preview of the sublime—that Millerites felt during the final days, weeks and hours. Rather, she recalled the absolute authenticity of her own and her fellow believers' experience. The Second Coming was absolutely real and incredibly close.

During that time of focused anticipation, believers could no longer pretend to be better than they were; no longer could they put off confronting the shabby impulses that underlay their personal weaknesses. Their *real* self would experience this *real* event. It was too late to play

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games. The spiritual authenticity of 1844 brought deep happiness to Ellen Harmon. For the rest of her life, she tried to tie the urgency she felt about the approaching Advent to her driving desire to recapture the openness and honesty of 1844—on a personal level, and within the Adventist community as a whole. We need to keep that dynamic in mind when evaluate the impact of Millerism on Ellen White’s life.

As she grew frail with advancing age and could no longer travel to speaking appointments or write large volumes of material, the *Review and Herald* published some of her materials, designed for reading out loud on Sabbath, either during Sabbath services or, for Adventists who lived far from any church, to each other at home. In November 1913, just before her eighty-sixth birthday, the *Review* published a message from Ellen White. She knew her own life was nearly over, and she had told a friend years earlier that she did not expect to live until the Second Coming. As she thought about her reunion with Jesus, which would occur in what seemed to be the next instant after her death, she sought to communicate to *Review* readers why the Second Advent was such a positive experience, and why being ready to meet Christ mattered:

At his second coming all will be changed. . . . Christ will come in his own glory. . . . Then the last trumpet will sound, the voice of God will speak, and the whole earth, from the summits of the loftiest mountains to the lowest recesses of the deepest mines, will hear that voice. It will be heard in the dungeons of men, in the caverns of the deep, in the rocks and caves of the earth, and it will be obeyed. It is the same voice that said, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,”—the same voice that said, “Thy sins be forgiven thee.” And those who obeyed that voice . . . will now hear the words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.” To them that voice will mean rest, peace, and everlasting life. They will recognize it as the voice of the One who has been touched with the feeling of their infirmities.⁸

As we look at Ellen White’s life, the myriad theological influences, the personal and family relationships, the books she and her assistants produced, and the institutions she inspired, we will understand her best if we can grasp what compelled her to endure. As she said in 1844, “I have seen a better land.” ■

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