

The Last Secrets

OF THE WHITE ESTATE

BY RON GRAYBILL

If you have the money to fly to Baltimore or Washington, DC, rent a car, and pay for meals and lodging for a couple of months, you might be able to explore the last secrets of the White Estate: the secrets embedded in the handwritten pages of Ellen White's letters and manuscripts. Before you make the trip, you would likely want to prove yourself an objective researcher with relevant qualifications. It might help if you have a positive record of support for the belief that Ellen White was a true prophet of God. The White Estate should not be expected to welcome someone who had already written articles or books full of gratuitous vilification of Ellen White.

I have long been fascinated by Ellen White's handwritten letters and diaries. Back in 1991, I even published an article in the scholarly journal, *Documentary Editing*, which I titled "The Meaning of Misspelled Words." Among other things, I pointed out that even

Ellen White's phonetic spelling was significant.

Ben Franklin was as insightful as he was humorous when he said: "As our Alphabet now Stands, the bad Spelling, or what is call'd so, is generally the best, as conforming to the Sound of the Letters and of the Words." It is in part because White's spellings "conform to the sound of the letters and words" that they contain historical data. The extraneous "r" she puts in words like "friverless" and "idear" allows us to hear her speaking in her native Maine accents.

Over the years, the White Estate has made access to Ellen White's letters and manuscripts steadily more open. At first, after her death, the Board of Trustees did not allow anything to be published that had not already been published during Ellen White's lifetime. The original Board had themselves received rebukes they probably did not want revealed. In 1932, *Medical Ministry* was the first compilation to include

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previously unpublished material.

A manuscript release policy was established in the 1930s, but very little was released until after Arthur White moved the White Estate to the General Conference in Washington, DC in 1938.

In those early days, researchers had to rely on an old card index to locate documents they might want to examine. That index was expanded as previously untranscribed letters and diaries were added to the file of typed copies. Even so, the index only noted topics that seemed important to staff members at the times the entries were created. No browsing was allowed. Researchers generally saw only the typed transcriptions of the original holographs (handwritten documents), not the handwritten drafts Ellen White herself created.

In the typed transcripts of Ellen White's letters or manuscripts, a researcher might find a sentence or paragraph he or she wanted to quote, then could request a manuscript release for that passage. Both the White Estate Board and the General Conference Spirit of Prophecy Committee had to approve the release. Later, the Board voted that if any portion of a letter or manuscript were requested for release, the entire document would be released, thus maintaining the original context.

Finally, in 2015, 100 years after Ellen White's death, all her published and unpublished writings were placed online at egwwritings.org. However, those were not the original Ellen White texts. They were the edited versions. Her secretaries had deciphered her handwriting as best they could, corrected her grammar, added punctuation and paragraphing, dropped words or added words, and thus created coherent, complete sentences. These were handed back to Mrs. White. She then reviewed, approved, and sometimes signed them. These edited documents were what was put online.

Ellen White seldom made corrections to those typed

copies, and if she added anything, it was often just to fill in blank space at the end of a paragraph where the line had only one or two words on it. Over the years, some of those handwritten emendations have been added to the online file enclosed in angled brackets.

There has been no systematic release or publication of Ellen White's handwritten documents, but over the years more than 200 facsimile pages have been published in various research papers, articles, and books. When the White Estate put Don McAdams's 1977 paper "Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians" online, the seventy-seven facsimile pages of the handwritten Huss manuscript were also included.

What is needed now? All the handwritten letters, manuscripts, and diaries need to be scanned in high-resolution color. But should those digital images then be placed online for all to see?

One point of view would say yes. If, as the Church believes, Ellen Gould Harmon White is the only individual after the close of the New Testament canon to receive special revelation, the only divinely inspired prophet, then every scrap of evidence that would confirm or discredit that claim should be open to the world.

It is likely, however, that vicious, scornful critics would seize on some poorly expressed handwritten passages to vilify Ellen White or the Church's view of her. Accommodating such critics hardly seems necessary. Furthermore, if the handwritten drafts were accessible to everyone without careful, accurate, literal scholarly transcriptions, a morass of variant transcriptions would soon plague Ellen White scholarship.

A better plan would be to enlist several scholars to create scholarly literal transcriptions. These scholars could check each other's work and thus arrive at an agreed-upon, high-quality transcription. Subsequent readers or scholars could later question passages in that "official"

transcription so it could be annotated with variants or revised and improved.

Next, these holographs and their scholarly transcriptions could be placed on stand-alone computers in all twenty-two of the White Estate branch offices and research centers around the world. These computers would not be equipped with modems or connected to the internet in any way. Scholars studying them could be forbidden even to photograph the screen with a mobile phone or camera. Only handwritten notes would be allowed.

Then these scholars could request the release of any holograph and its transcription they want to quote in their book or research paper. After a number of these requests were granted, those holographs and their transcriptions could be published in hard-copy volumes.

Meanwhile, as progress on the annotated volumes of Ellen White's letter and manuscripts progressed, each volume could incorporate the holographs and literal transcriptions, as well as the polished, edited transcriptions, of all the documents it annotated.

To speed the process of releasing these "last secrets" of the White Estate, the editors of these annotated volumes could recruit volunteer researchers to assist the paid staff in collecting information for annotation.

Even if all the holographs were placed online, and even if a host of objective scholars studied and transcribed all of them in detail, it is doubtful that opinions and beliefs about Ellen G. White's claim to divine inspiration either inside or outside the Church would be significantly altered. But in the absence of widely available access to the holographs, that cannot be known for sure.

And quite apart from any possible impact on Ellen White's claims, she is still a significant and interesting figure in American religious history and further insights into her life, her beliefs, her attitudes, her practices, her writing skills, and her relationships are worth pursuing. And it is simply an axiom of good historiography that the earliest extant copy of any document needs to be examined.

The haphazard discoveries of the secrets the holographs harbor has already shown that there are more to be discovered. For instance, in *Testimonies for the Church*, Volume 9, Ellen White was made to say that blacks and whites should not mingle in "social equality."¹ I say she was "made to say" that because that is not what her original handwritten draft said. That term, "social equality" was provided by her literary assistant, Clarence Crisler. What Ellen White wrote by hand in the original document was that whites and blacks should not mingle in "free and easy association."² This was stated at a time when to hold integrated church meetings invited mob violence. Ellen White was probably unaware of how inflammatory it would be to insert the term "equality" into the text.

Significant theological insights can be gained from the holographs. In 1892, Ellen White wrote in her diary: "I greatly desire a clear and distinct ideas of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith." The passage was not transcribed until 1911, when the same sentence was rendered to read: "I greatly desire a clear, distinct idea of the subject of righteousness by faith in Christ." Ellen White takes responsibility for both sentences, but the sentences are clearly different and reflect the different emphasis of different periods of her life. The original passage, which includes the word imputed, puts

greater emphasis on Christ's own righteousness, extrinsic to the sinner.³

There may be other significant wording changes like this introduced by the literary assistants. We will discover these when the holographs are more readily available.

When I first examined the 1890 "Salamanca Diary" and noted backdated passages there, Arthur White was incensed. He

came to my office and declared, heatedly, "Ellen White would not lie." I responded by saying that I did not say she lied, I merely pointed out that the dates on certain entries were not correct, that those entries could not have been written on the dates Ellen White assigned to them. To this day I insist we do not know what was in Ellen White's mind or what her intentions were when she wrote those

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entries. She may not have intended to deceive anyone, but the document she created did deceive Arthur White into believing she described detailed events before they occurred.

What happened is that events occurred during the 1891 General Conference in March of 1891 that recalled to Ellen White's mind a vision she had had in early November 1890, in Salamanca, New York. Convinced she had seen these events before they occurred, she inserted entries back into her 1890 diary, described those events in detail, and dated the entry November 3, 1890. She even interlined the words "A letter written from" so that the passage began "A letter written from Salamanca, N.Y. Nov. 3, 1890."

But the entry was placed on blank pages that remained in the back of the 1890 diary after the last original entry, the entry for December 31, 1890. Without access to the original holographic diary, one would not know that the entry was added well after the date assigned to it. Perhaps when all the holographs are readily available, scholars will identify cases of genuine prescience, but this was not one of them.

Back in the 1970s, while I was working at the White Estate, Alta Robinson, another staff member, complained to me about a case in which Arthur White had suppressed the fact that in a letter to her daughter-in-law in 1882, Ellen White had requested "a few cans of good oysters."⁴ When the letter was typed for the first time in the 1950s (under Arthur White's supervision), the reference to oysters had been omitted from the sentence without ellipses. When we carried the complaint to Arthur White, he had the letter retyped to include the oysters.

When the word got out that Ellen White had ordered oysters, the story expanded until workers in the Pennsylvania Conference were claiming that Ellen White ate oysters until the day she died. Robert Olson wrote the president of the conference, Gordon Henderson, admitting Ellen White ordered the oysters, but claiming, in the same letter "we have no record that she ever ate oysters."⁵ He also explained "We have never advertised the fact that Mrs. White ever even discussed oysters, because we felt it was not necessary." What was, necessary, however, was that the transcription of Ellen White's holographic letters be honest and complete. Alta Robinson and I saw to it that that was accomplished.

It may be that these few scattered instances of misdated, altered, or suppressed textual passages are themselves the last secrets of the White Estate. When the holographs are more readily accessible, diligent study can demonstrate that there are no more secrets to be revealed.

Endnotes

1. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9, p. 205.
2. Ellen G. White, Diary entry, March 2, 1903.
3. Ellen G. White, Diary entry for August 9, 1892, Manuscript 20, 1892.
4. Ellen G. White to Mary K. White (May 31, 1882), Letter 16, 1882.
5. Robert W. Olson to Gordon Henderson, February 13, 1979. Later in the letter, Olson said: "It may well be that Ellen White ate some of the oysters in those cans. This I do not know."



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Ellen G. White: ALL OR NOTHING?

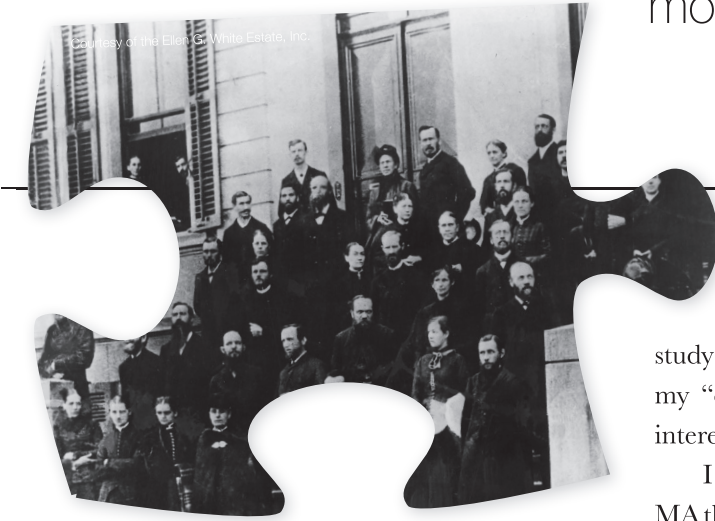
BY JONATHAN BUTLER

Steve Daily and I met in the 1980s, about forty years before he wrote *Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography*, at what was then Loma Linda University-La Sierra campus. He served there as a chaplain and I taught history. I first saw him pulling on his tennis shoes in the choking humidity of a locker room by the university pool. We had both been swimming laps. He was some ten years younger than I and looked another ten years younger than that. He brought up an article I had written in *Spectrum* on Ellen White's eschatology. He also talked about tennis.

We would become friends on and off the tennis court. His confluence of intellect and athleticism struck me as unusual, even incongruous. Hunched over a wooden bench, talking ideas with the broad back of a middle-weight boxer, he might have been Rodin's "The Thinker," except in bronze you would not have seen his striking blue



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eyes and blonde hair.

As relaxed and laconic as he seemed as a twentysomething, I would never have predicted the frenetic level of accomplishment that awaited him. He would produce more than 20 books in a varied and lustrous career in religion, church history, and psychology. In SDA circles, his most prominent work has been *Adventism for a New Generation* (with a foreword by Tony Campolo), a progressive reimagining of Adventism, which he dedicated to his three children and his wife (“Tweek, Bear, Bowser & the Babe”). His six grandchildren would come along later. He earned an MA in history at LLU (under me in fact), a DMin with an emphasis in church history at the School of Theology at Claremont, and a PhD in psychology at Alliant University. Steve left La Sierra—and eventually Seventh-day Adventism altogether—and founded KEYS Family Resource Center, as well as GraceWay Community Church in Riverside. The ferocity of his forehand on the tennis court should have alerted me to the fact that Steve had a fire in his belly; he was driven, passionate, intellectually curious, and tirelessly productive.

As multi-faceted as his life has been as a pastor,

counselor, historian, and writer, one motif has remained a constant for Steve: his historical study of Ellen White and Seventh-day Adventism. It’s my “canon within the canon” of his writing that most interests me.

I was there for his first historical effort—a 201-page MA thesis through the LLU History Department, on which I served as his chief advisor. It was entitled “How Readest Thou: The Higher Criticism Debate in Adventism and Its Implications Relating to Ellen White” (1982). In his first look at Adventist history, Daily examined Adventist views of inspiration through the prism of the 1919 Bible Conference. He delved deeply into the primary sources, including Ellen White’s writings, and he told the Adventist story within the larger historical context of an emergent Fundamentalism. American religion had polarized over higher criticism of the Bible, with inerrantist conservatism at odds with modernism’s secularist and naturalistic approach to the Scriptures. Seventh-day Adventists experienced the same conservative-modernist polarization, though the vast majority of Adventists were indistinguishable from the Fundamentalists. But, in one respect, Adventists were notably distinctive: the writings of Ellen White rather than the Scriptures were central to their debate on inspiration. In his mapping of Adventism’s place in Fundamentalism, Daily impressed me as a neophyte historian.

It seemed that in no time at all he completed a DMin in the School of Theology at Claremont. His doctoral project focused, once again, on Adventist history. In 1985,

he produced a 351-page study entitled “The Irony of Adventism: The Role of Ellen White and Other Adventist Women in Nineteenth-Century America.” In the midst of a historiographical tsunami on women in American history, Daily turned to women in Adventist history. He found the “irony of Adventism” to be that a charismatic female held such a dominant place in a movement permeated with misogyny. He noted that Adventism had never escaped its Fundamentalist view of inspiration, together with its Fundamentalist antipathy to feminism. This had a profound effect on the church, not only in White’s time but for subsequent generations. While Ellen White was elevated onto a lofty pedestal among Adventists, other women in the movement had not benefited, for the most part, in their own personal or professional lives.

Never faint of heart in taking on the Gordian knot of Adventism—Ellen White’s life and teachings—Daily argued that it had been White herself who had failed to promote egalitarianism within her community. Adventists had “opposed women’s rights and suffrage largely because of the testimonies of their prophetess.” Daily observed the discrepancy between Ellen White’s talk with respect to women’s role and her own actions as a wife, mother, and career woman (pp. viii–ix). It is a controversial argument, even today, but, in my opinion, it is the best of his four historical studies. Daily benefited from working under the renowned American religious historian, Ann Taves, his chief advisor at Claremont. For those wrestling with the issue of Adventist women’s ordination, it should be required reading.

In his preface to “The Irony of Adventism,” Daily laid out his personal convictions about doing a historical study of Ellen White, both for his professors at Claremont to read and for anyone else looking over their shoulders. He affirmed that White was “a visionary and a recipient of the prophetic gift.” He also believed, even while engaged in an academic exercise on history, that “divine truths are revealed through supernatural means which are not subject to naturalistic explanations or understood

apart from faith.” His other “convictions” could have been reached “apart from faith,” as simply sociological observations. He had concluded, for example, that Ellen White had “done more to benefit the Adventist community, than misrepresentations, and misuse of her

writings have done to harm the community.” He also felt that the Adventist church relied on White more for doctrine and personal ethics than on social ethics. He believed, too, that White’s writings were of most value for the church “when they are realistically seen to be fallible works,” products of their era, and not timeless blueprints by which to live. Daily concluded that his study was “not intended to be a critique of Ellen G.

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White or Adventism. This writer is” he declared, “heavily indebted and committed to both the church and the prophet.” (pp. vi–vii) He had offered here anything but a mindless testimony; this was a complex and sophisticated attempt to integrate faith and history.

No one should fault Daily for changing his view of White, especially over several decades. His third work, a 301-page, two-volume study on White and Adventism, was entitled *The Prophetic Rift: How Adventism Has Historically Misunderstood and Misapplied the Prophetic Gift, Vol. 1: 1840–1900; Vol. 2: 1900–2000* (2007, 2008). Here, Daily took to task the prophet and her followers, but he had not yet fully taken the gloves off as he would do in the psychobiography. The subtitle of *Prophetic Rift* suggested that he laid responsibility for problems with “the Spirit of prophecy” within Adventism largely on White’s followers, not on White herself. He referred to ways in which Adventists have “misunderstood and misapplied the prophetic gift.”

But this mischaracterized what Daily did in *The Prophetic Rift*, and in all his historical writings, for that matter. Unlike most in-house SDA historians, he has consistently blamed White herself, not just her misguided supporters, though not as searingly as he does in his latest book. Notably, Graeme Bradford, in *Prophets Are Human*, similarly recognized White’s shortcomings. Daily criticized Adventists, including White, for favoring the magisterial

Old Testament model of a prophet, such as Isaiah or Jeremiah, and slighting the more modest New Testament prophet, such as the Corinthian women. Relying on the evangelical scholar Wayne Grudem, in *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, Daily argued, “In the Old Testament, the prophets were often raised up to address specific abuses and had roles that were harsh, corrective and filled with reproof.” He noted a sharp contrast with prophecy in the New Testament. There “it is primarily the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16) and the Holy Spirit itself (John 16:8) that are called to play these corrective roles. The gift of prophecy by contrast is primarily for encouragement and comfort.” Daily believed that “Adventism imposed on Ellen White an Old Testament role that was inappropriate for her and for the body as a whole and she in turn imposed this role on herself” (pp. x–xi). In his view, this was a mistake. This is crucial for understanding Daily’s complaints against White and her place among Adventists.

I think Daily has a point, though he might have gone further. Any student of Ellen White, even the most admiring one, must wonder if the prophet fully understood the moving of the Spirit in her life. Along with many other Adventists, she simply lacked an adequate theory of inspiration—and feared that admitting any nuance or complexity into her crude explanations would play into the hands of unbelieving critics. White’s understanding of inspiration can certainly be a valuable starting point for

Adventists, but it is far from adequate as the final word.

That said, there is certainly more to Daily’s problems with Ellen White than her channeling of Old Testament prophets rather than New Testament Corinthian seers. The author of “The Irony of Adventism” has come to personify ironies of his own with respect to White. It is necessary to unlock them to understand Daily’s difficulties with White. In the first place, rather remarkably, he made his supernaturalistic affirmations of faith in the Adventist prophet just after a decade and a half of relentless, naturalistic assaults on her authority. He had clearly witnessed all that historical revisionism and made his own contributions to it. His faith had been quite obviously changed by it but not lost to it. In the second place, the same Daily who once declared himself “heavily indebted and committed to both the church and the prophet” has now, rather ironically—and from outside the church no less—produced a psychobiography of White that mixes history and exposé in a kind of poisonous brew. This is not a wholesale reversal for Daily. He has always pushed the envelope on White, and for this he should be congratulated. We are in his debt. But, in the psychobiography, he has taken things further. He forces us to ask ourselves how far along this path we can travel with him.

With Steve Daily’s earlier work as deep background, we can now turn to his latest book, the 332-page *Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography* (Conneaut, PA: Page Publishing,

His narrative anthologizes every bad day the woman had in her 87-year life and 70-year career and rubs her face in it, and our faces too. He writes with a historian’s version of Tourette’s Syndrome. As he lays out his story, he blurts out epithets such as “liar,” “hypocrite,” “narcissist,” “con artist,” “sociopath,” and “fraud.”



2020). In his introduction, he acknowledges that this book is a departure for him. In the past, he has been critical of “an all-or-nothing approach to Ellen, either glorifying her as a saint or denouncing her as a fraud.” But he claims to “have found new material” and can “no longer deny that her life contained patterns of premeditated fraud and deception that cannot easily be dismissed or rationalized.” He goes on to admit that his psychobiography is “polemical,” as well as “highly controversial and challenges traditional views of the prophethood” (p. 11). He delivers his polemics by way of a persistently negative tone. While the earlier Daily may never have liked Ellen White, he seems to have respected her and given the prophet her due. The new Daily appears flat-out antagonistic toward her and disavows her for numerous reasons. His narrative anthologizes every bad day the woman had in her 87-year life and 70-year career and rubs her face in it, and our faces too. He writes with a historian’s version of Tourette’s Syndrome. As he lays out his story, he blurts out epithets such as “liar,” “hypocrite,” “narcissist,” “con artist,” “sociopath,” and “fraud.” There is no ignoring that White had her problems, but Daily comes across as having his own problems. Often the “evidence” he cites does not warrant his historical—or psychobiographical—assessments. He becomes a historian not so much with a sound argument as with a verbal tic.

Biographies of Ellen White—from her defenders to her detractors—have a way of getting personal about the subject matter. This should surprise no one. The prophet is, after all, a “fundamental belief” of Adventism and, at the same time, a flesh-and-blood person who lived her life among Adventists. On the one hand, she is the manifestation of the “gift of prophecy,” emblematic of Adventism’s special place in the world. On the other hand, White is a person who ate meals with Adventists, preached sermons to them, made their lives healthier but could also lash out harshly in letters, offending or embarrassing them. The “gift of prophecy” was anything but an abstract doctrine. To reject *it* was to reject *her*. White took any opposition to her “spiritual gifts” personally, and her critics often meant it personally. There was an *ad hominem* edge to the defense of her and to the attacks on her. It was therefore the people closest to her that risked the conflicts with her—house guests or landlords, colleagues and their wives, literary assistants and editors, and even, or perhaps

especially, her spouse. They all understood that prophets were human; they knew this better than later generations, who lacked the personal contact with her. But there was, for some, such a thing as too much exposure to her humanity. In a way, those who study her history—such as Ronald Numbers and George Knight, Walter Rea and Steve Daily—come to know White up close and personal, warts and all, like her contemporaries did. It can be hazardous work for a devout Adventist. The *Didache*, a second-generation Christian document, warned that a prophet who stayed in your home as many as “three days” had to be a “false prophet.” The Canrights lived with the Whites much longer than three days, and D. M. Canright notoriously did dismiss White as a “false prophet.”

Daily has been personally close to several prophets in congregations he has pastored, and has been quite supportive of them. Drawn to the Vineyard movement in his thirties, he took a Pentecostal turn. As a result, where many of his fellow Adventists, confronting live prophets in their midst, call for an EMT or a psychiatrist, Daily integrates them into the life of his church. In a small congregation in Redlands, he had one prophet for years. I met another one, the wife of a teaching colleague of mine, and recommended she join Daily’s church because I knew she would feel welcome there. From a Pentecostal background, she traveled with her brother, an evangelist, and offered a prophetic “word of wisdom,” one-on-one, to people in his evangelistic audiences, after her brother had preached. At a Christmas party, she offered me a “word of wisdom.” I was wary at first but was pleasantly surprised. I found it to be unexpectedly inspirational, positive, and ego-boosting, in a good way. Not what I had been used to from a prophet. Daily welcomed her warmly into his congregation. She knew I came from an Adventist background, and she told me once, “In the history of your church, you have just one prophet; there should be several in every congregation. God’s message should not pass through the filter of one personality. It can distort your picture of God.” I have often pondered that “word of wisdom.” She had a Corinthian style of prophecy in mind for the church. In this new addition to his congregation, Daily may have found another reason to think negatively about Ellen White yet positively about living prophets he knows. He has enjoyed their contribution to his church far longer than the *Didache*’s “three days.”

Adventism has had enough of hagiography, which went out of fashion for the church in the 1970s. But the obsessive insistence on turning hagiography inside out to find nothing but bad in the historical figure is not an improvement on hagiography. It is a mirror image of it.

In reading the biography of a prophet, whether that prophet thunders from the Old Testament or speaks softly from the New, the reader hopes for even-handedness from the biographer, good judgment, fairness and, perhaps most important, empathy. There will be a difference, of course, if the prophet is more like a Winston Churchill or an Adolf Hitler. It is a problem, however, when the biographer confuses the two. In opting for a simplistic polemic rather than a complex, nuanced biography, Daily loses his way as a historian. He is less interested in understanding Ellen White than in casting aspersions on her. At times he is so off the mark that one suspects he would like to make her a cellmate of Margaret Rowan, who truly was a “con artist.” She sought to succeed White as the Adventist prophet, but instead was convicted of attempted murder and incarcerated in San Quentin.

Like good biographers, good actors understand empathy. The actor cast to play an evil character looks for the good in the person; the actor playing a good character explores the darker side of that goodness. It is bad acting as well as bad history to think of people as only good or only evil. Adventism has had enough of hagiography, which went out of fashion for the church in the 1970s. But the obsessive insistence on turning hagiography inside out to find nothing but bad in the historical figure is not an improvement on hagiography. It is a mirror image of it.

My metaphor for thinking of this is my maternal grandmother (“Granny”). Granny may have been bi-polar with schizoid affective disorder, but she lived her life before we knew about such a diagnosis or medications that might have dealt with her problems. For us she was simply a colorful character about whom we all could tell stories, first-

hand and second-hand, of her erratic behavior, bizarre rages, insults, and abuse. My mother recalls, as a child, the time Granny threw a hot pie at her, straight from the oven, burning her forearm. She also remembers being told by her mother to do the dishes without getting one drop of water on the newly remodeled kitchen counter. When she inevitably failed, Granny chopped up the counter with an axe. But I should also say of Granny—and this is why she comes to mind as a metaphor—there was a wonderfully gracious, deeply respected, highly intelligent, well-read, widely traveled woman whom no one would have believed was the Granny we knew. My most vivid and enduring memory of her is not her chopping up the kitchen counter; that was mere folklore for me. It was the way she sat me down in the living room, in my early teens, and read me Shakespeare—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—and took me to an Old Vic theater production of *Hamlet*. Granny, I am sure, had far greater psychological problems with which to contend than Ellen White and would have made a ripe subject for the psychobiographer. But Daily may have been as ill-suited to do Granny’s biography as he is Ellen White’s. For Granny, Daily would recount, with relish and relentless redundancy, the scalding pie incident and the demolished kitchen counter, but would leave out her reading *Macbeth* in the living room.

Do not misunderstand my criticism of Daily. I found the book well worth reading. I scribbled copious notes to myself in its margins in places where I agree with him, and other places where he serves as a foil for sharpening my disagreements. But many of Daily’s difficulties with White are well-grounded and cannot be ignored or summarily dismissed.

Daily is right that White did insist that her visions were untainted by humanity—hers or anyone else’s. He is also right that she lacked mothering skills. She had a troubled marriage, too, though neither James nor Ellen was blameless as a marital partner. He is also right that the prophet had a mean streak. And she did plagiarize other authors more substantially than she admitted to her contemporaries. In light of all this—and most of it has been in full view for some 40–45 years—no biographer should gloss over the flawed humanity of Ellen White. It is very much part of her story, but it is not the whole story. My complaint with his history in *Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography* is that Daily is far too close to his subject to tell that story in all its complexity. He lacks the detachment necessary in a good biographer, much less psychobiographer, necessary to the task. In the ultimate irony, he tells the story more from White’s point of view than his own. He takes her views of the visions, and her inspired writings based on them, quite literally. He then holds her to those claims rather rigorously. When she fails him, he hoists her on her own petard. She was not the woman she made herself out to be—not because she was flawed but a fraud. Ellen White and Steve Daily are joined at the hip on who she ought to be. They part company on who she turned out to be. Here I would like Daily to develop a little distance from White to help us understand her more deeply and insightfully as historians—and psychobiographers—attempt to do. Daily short-circuits

that analysis by taking a sharp right turn into incessant name-calling, however he dresses it up theologically and ethically, sociologically and psychologically.

I am pleased to add Steve Daily’s biography to my bookshelf. We need a dozen more biographies of White, a score more of them. She deserves that kind of attention. But I came away from reading Daily’s psychobiography—always a high-risk venture in the best of hands—with

a number of questions. Daily concludes that White’s “visions,” which he puts in quotes, were not from God and, even worse, she knew this and was conning her followers with a big lie. Daily sours on White’s “visions” because, for example, they contain inaccurate information; or they pass on borrowed material; or they serve White’s self-interest. This smacks more of the simplistic argument of a believer—or ex-believer—than a sophisticated psychobiographer. There are many ways of thinking about visions short of flimflam. Psychobiographers might decide White was self-deluded but not deliberately deceptive. They might note White immersed herself in historical or devotional reading and then dreamed about it. She might have engaged in conversations and dreamed about those. It has to be taken into account that women in the nineteenth century did not easily get a hearing; visions

were one way White got a seat at the table. So, whether or not White “had” visions in a way that satisfies Daily, where is his evidence that she did not *believe* that she did? This viewpoint may create another problem for the believer, but it does not make her into a fraud.

Daily is troubled by the fact that James and Ellen White prospered financially from the publication of her books and this undercut her claims as a prophet. But is this a fair criticism? Seventh-day Adventism has been a socially mobile religion, in no small part due to White’s writings. White’s promotion of health, education, and medicine, as well as a good

old-fashioned work ethic, would seem to have made Adventism’s economic prosperity inevitable. White made a good income over her lifetime, though Daily exaggerates her wealth. But she gave a great deal of her money away and died in considerable debt.

Daily hammers the prophet for her plagiarism. But he seems satisfied with reminding us of this dubious practice—and blaming White for it—without doing

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much to illuminate for us why she may have done it. The psychobiographer would want to explore this in depth. Obviously, there was a yawning gap between her rudimentary skillset as a writer and what she actually published. Should we explain this as a crushing case of "author's anxiety," resulting in her wholesale borrowing, but not a prophetic pyramid scheme to defraud her followers?

White clearly had her flaws. Is there any prophet who did not? But does rejecting her based on the fact that she was a flawed human being back us into a kind of Donatist or perfectionist heresy? She cannot be a vessel for God if there are chips in the clay. And yet who makes the decision to throw out the vessel?

Daily's psychobiography is an ambitious and, for some, a provocative undertaking. It is hard to determine whether this is so much a "psychobiography" as a prickly, narrative history packaged as one. I do ask myself what we have learned about White from this approach that we did not already know. He cites the "Goldwater Rule" that you cannot make psychological judgments on someone unless you are able to examine them in a therapeutic setting. But then he often overcomes his hesitance and does diagnose White.

Daily claims to have uncovered "new material," which resulted in his iconoclastic take on Ellen White. I am at a loss to identify much, if anything, that is new in his book. He surveys familiar ground and dredges up no new facts, only a new perspective—new for him at least—on old facts. The value of his study is to force Adventists to come to terms—in their own way, if not in Daily's way—with White's humanity. I think the study is marred, however, by forcing White into a prophet-fraud polarity. Historians view demarcating between "prophets"

and "frauds" as above their pay grade. That is more of a theological than a historical designation. Historians find nothing useful in the all-or-nothing paradigm; history is too messy for it. Daily seems uninterested, however, in strictly adhering to historical canon. He comes at White from too many angles, but his intentions are clear. Though he left the church a decade ago, he is determined to justify his decision in classic "exit literature." I wish he had written a different book—something like the subtle, complex history he once wrote.

All or nothing? Give me another choice.



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