

Revisions of the Adolescent Ellen Harmon:

A Review of Donald Casebolt's *Child of the Apocalypse: Ellen G. White*

BY DENIS FORTIN

Donald Edward Casebolt, *Child of the Apocalypse: Ellen G. White*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021. xx + 98 pp.

Attempts at understanding Ellen Harmon's youth, her adolescent years before her marriage to James White in August 1846 (at age 18 and 9 months), are not new, but two books published in the last twelve months are creating a new interest in this fairly neglected period of her life. The two books are challenging the traditional consensus to postulate new theories of her spiritual development in a religious context prone to apocalyptic fervor and ecstatic experiences. The result is a revisionist perspective of Ellen White's early religious experience.

Ellen White herself sought to explain to others her prophetic ministry through autobiographies of her early religious experiences. The first such autobiography appeared in *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (1851) and covered the years from her conversion at age 11 to 1850. The second autobiographical account was published in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 2 (1860), and gives an account of her life from her accident at age 9 to 1858. The third one was part of James White's *Life Incidents* (1868). Then came a series of editions of *Life Sketches*, each one adding information of recent years (1880, 1888, 1915). In all of these autobiographies, Ellen White presented the facts

of her early religious life as she recalled experiencing them many years later. There is no attempt at evaluating whether what she experienced was good or less good, but she sought to convince her readers that her experiences were genuine, led by God, and prepared her for a life-long prophetic ministry.

Denominational biographies have basically followed the same presentation of the young Ellen Harmon's religious life and have not given much emphasis to its socio-religious context. At times, these biographies have been somewhat hagiographic commentaries on her own autobiographies, as with her grandson Arthur White's biography, *Ellen G. White*, vol. 1, *The Early Years: 1827 to 1862*.¹ There have been a few attempts at providing the historical and socio-religious context of her early life. Woodrow Whidden provided an analysis of the implications of her Methodist roots on her views of the doctrine of salvation in his *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study*.² Likewise, Merlin Burt gave an analysis of her Methodist conversion in a brief article in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.³ Also providing some historical context for her youth is Jerry Moon and Denis Kaiser's biographical essay "For Jesus and Scripture: The Life of Ellen G. White," also in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.⁴

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These attempts have been helpful and relied mainly on Ellen White's source materials.

During the last few decades, the need for further analysis of young Ellen Harmon's early religious experience has been felt in a number of ways. The ecstatic and charismatic experiences among Millerites and early Sabbatarian Adventists have been known for a long time and have generated some interest. We have known that young Ellen Harmon participated in such experiences, as many expressions she used in her autobiographies indicate her familiarity with religious "enthusiasm." We know that she came from a branch of Methodism called the "shouting Methodists," admittedly a branch more prone to emotional demonstrations. Also, a resurgence of interest in the Israel Dammon trial in early 1845, and Ellen Harmon's presence during these events, cannot be dismissed easily.⁵

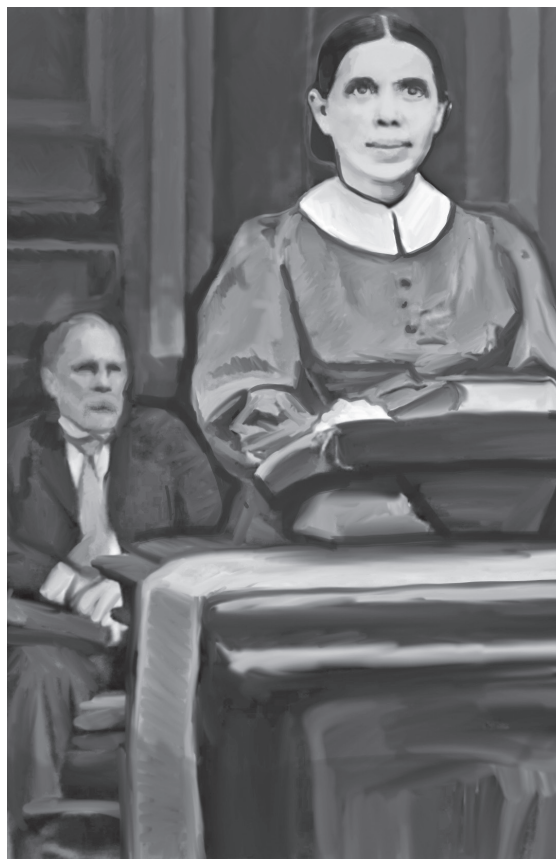
The historiography of Ellen Harmon's early life has been an area of research waiting to be addressed. And, in the last year, two such studies have been published.

Many reviews have already addressed Steve Daily's contribution and its strengths and weaknesses.⁶ His *Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography* disturbed the traditional Adventist interpretation of Ellen White's religious experience by postulating that her family of origin, her traumatic head injury, her Methodist upbringing, and her connection with the

Millerite movement give sufficient evidence to conclude that her psychological personality was narcissistic and domineering. In my opinion, Daily's historical reconstructions of some events are often lacking adequate support and make wrong assumptions, but his analysis of Ellen Harmon's adolescence is presenting some perceptions that have not been discussed before. The impact of her accident, her fear of damnation and of God, her puzzling relationship with her twin sister, and the influence of Millerite apocalypticism on her psychological personality bring together an assessment that deserves attention. Adventist readers must ask themselves whether this revisionist portrait paints a more authentic Ellen White.

Donald Casebolt's new book, *Child of the Apocalypse:*

Ellen G. White, on the other hand, offers a reconstruction of the socio-religious context in and around Portland, Maine, during Ellen Harmon's youth, to better understand her autobiographical statements.⁷ He also sets her religious experience within the historical context of Methodism and Millerism. His incisive analysis provides another revisionist perspective that is also bound to cause some discomfort. In a way that I don't think has been done before, Casebolt presents a time correlation between Ellen White's autobiographical statements and events of the Millerite movement she participated in. As he does this correlation, Casebolt comes to



Credit: Jared Wright

some startling conclusions. Overall, he claims that young Ellen Harmon received such a social imprinting on her religious experience at her young age that it made her a “child of the Apocalypse”; that she became the Ellen G. White of later years because she was raised and came of age in a socio-religious context at once millenarian, apocalyptic, and religiously ecstatic. A quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes sets the theme of the book: “We are all tattooed in our cradles with the beliefs of our tribe; the record may seem superficial, but it is indelible”. I find this book offers three major revisionist arguments worth some attention.

Casebolt claims that Ellen Harmon as a youth of 11 years old, barely two years after her traumatic head injury, and a few months after dropping out of school for the last time because of the added mental strain it caused her, could not have understood the detailed meaning and implications of William Miller’s complicated time prophecies and fifteen mathematical proofs of the second coming of Christ when she first heard him in March 1840. What she accepted was an apocalyptic message that her weak mind could only grasp in general terms. Here, Casebolt follows Daily’s argument that her deep psychological fear of God and of death disposed her to accept Miller’s apocalyptic scenario (14–15). Therefore, he claims that what she accepted could not have been adequately and critically processed in her mind. She was after all only a sick and impressionable 11-year-old child. Her religious context and personal experiences, not a voice from heaven, facilitated her acceptance of Miller’s message. Then, according to Casebolt, White’s autobiographies give evidence of confabulation, the creation of false memories to explain or embellish the experiences of her youth. These arguments put serious doubt on the authenticity or accuracy of Ellen White’s biographical records.

Casebolt’s book also challenges Ellen White’s assertion that God somehow had hidden or covered the

mistakes that William Miller and his colleagues made in concluding that Jesus would return on successive dates, ending with October 22, 1844 (see *The Great Controversy*, 353). He contends that this argument (God hiding the mistake) originated with Samuel Snow in his allegorical-typological-historicist interpretation of passages in Ezekiel (12:22), Habakkuk (2:2, 3), Jeremiah (51:45–46) and 2 Esdras, an interpretation known as the “tarrying time” (30–33).⁸ While a plain and common-sense reading of Matthew 24:36 (“nobody knows the day or the hour”) would conclude that the precise day of the Second Coming of Christ could not be known, only an allegorical and typological interpretation of many passages taken out of context and strung together could sustain the interpretation that people could know the exact day of the Second Coming. Casebolt argues that both William Miller and S. S. Snow used this allegorical methodology to sustain all their farfetched mathematical calculations and interpretations. In a general sense, Ellen Harmon accepted Snow’s conclusion without really understanding its substance. Casebolt’s arguments seriously weaken Ellen White’s foundational interpretation of the end of the Millerite movement, and without this interpretation, is there a foundation to the original Sabbatarian Adventist movement she helped establish?

Another conclusion from Casebolt’s book is his interpretation of how Ellen Harmon came to have a prophetic ministry. The usual Adventist narrative insists “that she rocketed from total obscurity on October 21, 1844 to public prophetess by January 1, 1845” (50). Rather, Casebolt argues that the accounts of her early religious awakening and her Millerite experience show that she progressed through several phases of development from the early days of her conversion at age 11 to her first post-disappointment visions in 1844 and 1845. By the time the Millerite movement collapsed on October 23, 1844, she was already an

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influential voice in her social context, acquired through visions and ecstatic experiences, public prayers, and some attempts at exhortation (50–51). By then, some Methodist pastors had affirmed her early influence (56–57). He also offers some examples of other religious figures who had similar experiences: William Foy, Caleb Rich, Richard Randel, and even a Catholic visionary in France, Bernadette Soubirous. Casebolt challenges the traditional understanding of Ellen Harmon’s “first” vision in December 1844 by arguing that she already was perceived as a visionary youth by then.

These recent books create a similar discomfort in the minds of many Adventist readers. In part, the discomfort is the result of a revisionist interpretation of Ellen White’s life that removes perceptions of supernatural intervention and guidance. Biographical facts and events are interpreted in psychological and historical terms without references to divine intervention. But to be fair, many biographies of Ellen White, including her own autobiographies, have mostly downplayed or simply avoided any impressions of her fallible humanity that could have tampered with the supernatural guidance and inspiration she claimed. Traditionally, what Ellen White wrote about her own biographical impressions and perspectives have not been questioned or interpreted in their historical context. Her biblical, historical, and theological interpretations have usually not been corrected, even if perceived as less than accurate today. As George Knight has shown, the Church created a mythology around her life and writings after she died.⁹ Hence, a real discomfort happens when this mythology is challenged, and Daily and Casebolt’s books upset the

comfort zones, as did books by Walter Rea and Ron Numbers two generations ago. These recent books should not be summarily dismissed, however, but should be responded to with scholarly and honest research.

Those interested in the Millerite movement, early Adventist studies, and Ellen White’s biography will have to read and interact with this new book. Casebolt mentions that he is finishing a second book, *Father Miller’s Daughter: Ellen Harmon White*, in which he will study more closely Ellen White’s relationship to William Miller’s apocalyptic message and allegorical methodology. This will undoubtedly be another interesting contribution.

Endnotes

1. Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White*, vol. 1: *The Early Years (1827–1862)* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985).
2. Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1995).
3. Merlin D. Burt, “Conversion, Ellen G. White’s,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 734–736.
4. Jerry Moon and Denis Kaiser, “For Jesus and Scripture: The Life of Ellen G. White,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 18–95.
5. See a brief survey of the trial and its issues as pertaining to Ellen Harmon in James R. Nix, “Dammon, Israel,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 358–360.
6. Alberto R. Timm, “Steve Daily on Ellen G. White,” *BRI Reflections*, May 2021, <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Reflections-74-April-June-2021.pdf>; Hans Gutierrez, “The Embarrassment of Having a Prophet: On Steve Daily’s Ellen White Psychobiography,” *Spectrum* online, June 10, 2021, <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2021/embarrassment-having-prophet-steve-dailys-ellen-white-psychobiography>; Jonathan Butler, “Ellen G. White: All or Nothing?,” *Spectrum* online, June 30, 2021, <https://spectrummagazine.org/arts-essays/2021/ellen-g-white-all-or-nothing>; Hans Gutierrez, “How Historically Embodied Is a Prophet? On Steve Daily’s ‘Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography,’” *Spectrum* online, July 8, 2021, <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2021/how-historically-embodied-prophet-steve-dailys-ellen-g-white-psychobiography>; Hans Gutierrez, “How Biblical Is Ellen White? On Steve Daily’s ‘Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography,’” *Spectrum* online, August 12, 2021, <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2021/how-biblical-ellen-white-steve-dailys-ellen-g-white-psychobiography>.
7. Donald Edward Casebolt, *Child of the Apocalypse: Ellen G. White* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021).
8. See Samuel S. Snow, *The True Midnight Cry* 1, no. 1, August 22, 1844.
9. George R. Knight, *Ellen White’s Afterlife: Delightful Fictions, Troubling Facts, Enlightening Research* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2019).



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