

Understanding history: Seventh-day Adventists and their perspectives

Daniel Reynaud

Associate Professor, Assistant Dean, Learning & Teaching, Faculty of Arts, Nursing and Theology, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

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Introduction

History is never abstract. It is always the story of how we came to believe and act the way we do today. Understanding the history of a particular denomination can transform discussions of contemporary issues from divisive stone-throwing to a more sensitive awareness of how and why certain beliefs and practices are current, or are currently under threat of change. And a knowledge of a Seventh-day Adventist understanding of history explains a great deal about the church and touches on many of the key conflicts and controversies that have affected, and currently affect, the church. Hence, it is topical for the teacher in Adventist schools, and by parallel, to teachers in all Christian schools.

The importance of history to the Seventh-day Adventist (hereafter Adventist) church is evident in the place that history holds in the curriculum of all Adventist tertiary institutions, as well as in the creation of institutional archives and of research centres around the world tasked with exploring the legacy of pioneer Adventists. This article explores the ways in which Adventist writers and scholars have approached history, the ways in which they themselves have written works of a historical nature, and to what ends history has been put in the church. Seventh-day Adventism emerged from the Millerite groups that survived The Great Disappointment of 1844, establishing its core doctrines, denominational name and structure by 1863 (Schwarz & Greenleaf, 2000). Core to Adventist theology has been a concern with history, which it owes to its Millerite roots. William Miller (1781-1849) swapped sceptical rationalism after his conversion to an Evangelical Baptist faith in 1816 for a 'common sense' hermeneutic that shaped his interpretation of the Bible. With a kind of mathematical precision (Arasola, 1990), Miller interpreted scripture in the light of history—his principal work in its many

editions was entitled *Evidences from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year A.D. 1843, and of His Personal Reign for 1,000 Years* (1833, 1st ed.). Miller always demanded evidence; Scripture was, for him, authority; *history* merely spotlighted his era as the time when remarkable fulfilments of Bible prophecy were anticipated (Crocombe, 2011, p. 53; Knight, 1993, p. 56).

Early Sabbatarian Adventism cherished all three of Miller's components: evidence, Scripture and history. Two of its three co-founders were formerly ardent Restorationists: Joseph Bates (1792-1872) and James White (1821-1881) had been members of the Christian Connection as well as Millerite preachers (Reid, 1990). The third co-founder of Sabbatarian Adventism, Ellen Gould Harmon White (1827-1915), was a Methodist drilled in John Wesley's notion of 'Primitive Godliness.' During a thirty-year period, 1858-1888, with the concepts of Restorationism and Millerism in the backs of their minds, Adventists idealised biblical/prophetic, Protestant Reformation and Evangelical Revival history, envisioning themselves as completing the processes initiated by Christian reformers of earlier times. History was a means of demonstrating the engagement of God in human affairs, with the Adventists as the heirs of God's promises and particular agents of his current activity in the world. The pursuit of history was in the hands of lay people or minimally-trained clergy and teachers; professional historical endeavour was little considered because it was seen as lacking necessary spiritual insight. Thus, for early Adventists, history was always subordinate to theology. They were not interested in history as a discipline, but only as a product.

Nineteenth-century idealists

Four important Adventist writers who made influential use of history in their religious writings were Uriah Smith (1832-1903), the prominent editor of Adventist publications; Ellen White (1827-1915), whose work gained major leverage through her

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prophetic status; John Nevin Andrews (1829-1883), who wrote an influential study on the history of the Sabbath, and Alonzo Trevier Jones (1803-1923), a prolific writer on historical and theological issues.

Of the self-educated Uriah Smith's three chief works dealing with history, the most influential were his apocalyptic commentaries, combined as *The Prophecies of Daniel and Revelation* (1897), and is still in print. Smith used history to validate his interpretation of biblical apocalyptic, listing his sources to indicate his reliance upon classic works of Protestant history. His second major historical work was *The United States in Prophecy*, later rewritten as *The Marvel of Nations*, which traced American history from the perspective that divine providence was guiding its development. He did not discount conventional history, but he argued that "[i]f we believe that there is a God who rules in the kingdoms of men (Dan 5: 21), we must look for his providential hand in human history, in the rise, career, and fall of the nations and peoples of the world" (Smith, 1887, preface). A third work was *Our Country's Future*, which interpreted Bible prophecies deemed to apply to the future of the USA, with the expectation that history would bear out his version. Smith based much of his historical writing on existing histories, as he felt that these works had already established the facts; his aim was to provide what they had missed – God's point of view. Smith saw prophecy and history on a continuum: one was history anticipated, the other was prophecy fulfilled.

Ellen White, the most influential writer during Adventism's first seventy years, received formal education only until the third-grade. From that point on, she was self-educated through a lifetime of reading, though her historical reading was limited to the Protestant historians whose world-views were similar to her own. White outlined in five major volumes – *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890), *Prophets and Kings* (1917), *The Desire of Ages* (1898), *The Acts of the Apostles* (1911), and *The Great Controversy* (in various editions between 1858-1911)—the activity of God in biblical and religious history from creation to the Second Coming. Like Smith, White took an exclusively providential point of view, explaining each event in terms of God's interaction with the affairs of men.

White's use of history had a special import that the writings of other Adventist authors of her era did not possess. While others could be quite dogmatic, none claimed direct revelation through supernatural visions as White did. The authority of her historically-related writings was questioned, to which White and her son Willie made revealing comments on her use of history. Ellen White specifically claimed direct revelation of some historical events, which

she characteristically described as "scenes" or "views," and which Willie depicted as "flashlight pictures." Willie emphatically declared that she was not dependent on historians as other writers were, noting that on one occasion she was able to tell him accurately about events described in a book he had not yet read aloud to her, having seen the events in vision. At the same time, Ellen White openly disavowed her writings as a standard of historical accuracy, routinely quoting from established Protestant historians, and revising historical details in later editions of her books, a process described by her grandson Arthur L. White as "the subordination of historical detail to the purpose of the book." (Ellen G. White, Letter 14, 1889; Letter 86, 1906; Letter 56, 1911; Arthur L. White, "Toward a factual concept of inspiration, II," Ellen G. White Research Centre, Avondale College, DF65-a, 20, 22, 24-25; White, 1950, p. x). Despite impressing Willie with her ability to recite history she had not yet heard, Ellen in fact was well read in Protestant history over many years, and it is an exaggeration to claim that her visions were the principal source of her historical writings (McAdams, 1980, pp. 28-31). Indeed, as A. G. Daniells observed after her death, "we were warned against using Sister White as a historian. She never claimed to be that" (Numbers, 2008, p. 360). Her frequent unacknowledged borrowing from historians caused some distress to her followers from the 1880s onward; turmoil erupted when later generations of Adventists discovered that her writings were not all directly from God, even though she had not made such a claim for herself in the first place.

However, Ellen White was unapologetic about her unacknowledged quotes, saying she gave no specific credit where she borrowed, "since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject" (White, 1950, p. xii). More recent researchers have debated the extent to which White copied, paraphrased, or even carelessly distorted the historians she quoted. It is evident that she borrowed significant segments of her history from Uriah Smith, whose words were often a light paraphrase of other writers. Therefore, some of White's historical errors are not original to her, having been copied from Smith (Land, 1980, p. 93; McAdams, 1980, pp. 29, 34, 35). She did not follow Smith slavishly, however, at one point she censured him for using Gibbon as a source (White, 1885, p. 520). In fact, Ellen White did not see herself as an historian and she condemned much of the historical profession for being preoccupied with the pursuit of worldly goals. It was sacred history that White considered as being

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of supreme value, for it revealed the fulfilment of prophecy, the workings of Providence in the great reform movements, and the events associated with the end of time (White, 1942, pp. 441-442). Even her own autobiographical writings were apologetic rather than strictly historical, and relied heavily on accounts of her visions to authenticate her message (Land, 2014, pp. 322-324).

John Nevin Andrews was an influential theologian, helping to establish key historical and contemporary connections in Adventist apocalyptic interpretation. But perhaps his most important work was *The History of the Sabbath and the First Day of the Week* (1859), which grounded Adventist seventh-day Sabbatarianism in a historical context, and thus through its ancient origins and practice giving it a sounder apologetic foundation. This work was crucial in establishing the Sabbath in both Adventist theology and practice.

Ex-army non-commissioned officer and leading Adventist theologian and editor Alonzo Jones (1898) was another passionate amateur historian. He wrote a number of historical works, some of them voluminous, on a diverse array of topics. Jones' histories were like those of Smith and White – always taking a divine perspective on human affairs. “History, properly studied,” he wrote, “is but the study of the grand purposes of God with men and nations. It is evident, therefore, that the proper study of history can be made only upon the basis of the word of God – the Bible. Upon that basis this history is composed” (Jones, 1898, preface, p. v). Yet Jones differed particularly from Ellen White by claiming no originality and by quoting all his sources as the authority for his historical statements (Jones, 1887, preface). In that sense he was the more careful of the early Adventists in his use of history.

Other contributors to Adventist-authored history included Joseph Bates, whose autobiography was the first Adventist historical work which was not apologetic (Land, 1994, xvi). Ellen's husband James White and John Norton Loughborough also wrote historical works. The latter wrote the first account of the Adventist church, *The Rise and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (1892), later expanded as *The Great Advent Movement, Its Rise and Progress* (1905). It was more of a chronicle than a history, as it lacked an evaluative dimension. His biography of Ellen White, along with her own writings, “established the foundation for an Adventist historical understanding of Ellen White” in a strictly apologetic genre (Land, 2014, p. 325). But none of the early Adventist historical writers considered themselves as rewriting the basic historical data: essentially, all saw history as apologetic, not critical. To them, history traced the establishment of the

pure apostolic church after the resurrection of Jesus, followed by its gradual decline and apostasy, and then long restoration from the Reformation through to the Advent Movement. However, while not acting as historians, they were not afraid to disagree with each other and conduct a robust discussion on issues of applying history to biblical interpretation. They operated in a context of (mostly) respectful but lively debate.

Early-mid twentieth-century efforts

The capacity to respectfully disagree did not last long. In the years following the death of Ellen White in 1915, polarisation occurred in the church between progressives and conservatives, who lurched towards a more militant, even Fundamentalist position, sharing the latter's fear of an emerging Modernism (Campbell, 2008, pp. 40-51, 190-191) and squashing the earliest signs of a more rigorous historiographical approach to history. Clement L. Benson and Edwin Franklin Alberstworth, the first professionally-trained historians with higher degrees from secular universities, began to push for a more professional approach to church history, supported by appropriate training and resourcing. They argued that shoddy history undermined the sound biblical arguments of the church (Campbell, 2008, pp. 184-190). Unfortunately, despite the largely favourable reception of their presentations at the Bible Conference of 1919, specially convened to deal with issues of biblical and spiritual authority after the loss of the governing voice of Ellen White, these two men fell victim to the conservative backlash of the 1920s and both eventually left the organisation under suspicion of holding liberal Modernist views (Campbell, 2008, p. 192). Historiographically-informed discussion, particularly on the nature of White's inspired role in the church, was stymied for another fifty years.

The 1919 Bible Conference, held in camera, represented a missed opportunity for the church, especially in developing a sound understanding of the relationship between White's writings and history. One of the issues addressed was the teaching of history and historical method. W.W. Prescott opened the discussion by asserting that a providential history was the only true history, showing the “unity of history under the control of one Will” (Campbell, 2008, pp. 183-184). General Conference president A. G. Daniells, a former confidant of Ellen White, responded to questions by teachers over issues of factual disagreements between history texts and Ellen White books. He clearly stated several times Ellen White's warning not to use her as a historical authority (Numbers, 2008, p. 360). But Daniells found such talk left some employees shaken,

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and the conference transcripts were locked away until accidentally discovered by an archivist in the 1970s. Daniells himself had a manuscript published posthumously in 1936, *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy*, which traced in the traditional Adventist manner God's use of prophets. It updated Adventist history into the 20th century.

Another aspiring Adventist historian was Everett Dick, who pursued doctoral studies in the Millerite movement, as being less threatening than ones about the denomination itself. His hopes that the church would publish his insightful work were dashed. Initially denied access to the archives of the Review and Herald, the church's chief publishing house, his manuscript was rejected by various Adventist publishers, especially after influential church editor LeRoy Froom labelled it "too defeatist." Asked to write a denominational history book for the church's young people, he disowned it as a scholarly work because he was forced to sanitise it. Discouraged, he turned from Adventist history, and from the 1930s forged a distinguished career in American mid-West history. His Millerite book was finally published in 1994, with an excellent foreword by Gary Land (Land, 1994, pp. vii-viii).

Several other Adventist historians of the early and middle decades of the Twentieth Century worked along lines less disturbing to church administrators. Following Loughborough, Mahlon E. Olsen, Arthur W. Spalding, LeRoy Froom, and Francis D. Nichol were among those who adopted more historical methods of writing (Knight, 2007, p. 45). Olsen studied the reform movement from Martin Luther onwards, placing Adventism firmly as its true heir in *A History and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (1926, Land, 1994, pp. xvi-xvii). Despite wide-ranging primary research about pioneer Adventists, he had difficulty accessing some sources due to the non-cooperation of Ellen White's son Edson (Taylor, 2014). His work was sound but unadventurous, avoiding apologetics, but it also "largely eschewed interpretation in favour of description" (Land, 2014, p. 326). Spalding wrote two key historical works: *Captains of the Host* (1949, Vol. 1) and *Origins and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (1961). As probably the most widely-read histories of Adventism, he was consequently influential. He wrote openly for Adventist believers, not attempting to be objective, but consciously using a tone that was warm, and at times fervent (Spalding, 1949, pp. 7-8). He was aware of the limitations of his work, although his research drew on useful secondary and primary sources including Olsen, Matilda Erickson Andross and Emma E. Howell, the latter two being the first Adventist women historians, and authors of Adventist histories for young people.

Two key Adventist editors also contributed works of history, predictably adopting a line that supported the dominant denominational narrative. Nichol, associate editor of the flagship Adventist publishing house the Review and Herald, published *The Midnight Cry in 1944*. A somewhat apologetic and consciously subjective work based on extensive primary research, it was influential in rescuing the Millerites from their popular reputation of fanaticism, winning very positive reviews upon its release, though recently it has been critiqued for its misuse of evidence (Mitchell, 1946; Land, 1994, pp. xvii-xviii). He also authored a systematic apologist rebuttal of disillusioned former Adventist minister Dudley M. Canright's 1919 posthumous polemic against White.

Froom, an editor of *Ministry*, the journal for Adventist clergy, published a massive four-part series *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* between 1948 and 1953, in which he exhaustively traced the use of the Historicist approach to biblical prophecy, defending it as the oldest and soundest method. Praised by non-Adventist scholars for its impressive scope and meticulous documentation, its scholarly judgments were cramped by its narrow parochial focus and its apologetic tone. In the end, its chief value was primarily bibliographic. Froom claimed to have given "a fair and faithful to fact, comprehensive and impartial treatment," (Froom, 1971, p. 18) but his work fell short of this high standard. Other important works by Froom included the two-volume *Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (1965-1966), a history of the doctrine of the conditional mortality of the soul, and *Movement of Destiny* (1971), tracing the history of Adventism and controversially including valuable discussions of various theological debates. Significantly, the work of Dick was intentionally overlooked in the otherwise comprehensive bibliographies of both Froom and Nichol. Other apologetic writers of the era included Jerome Clark, Robert Gale and Mervyn C. Maxwell, all of whom adopted a simple theological narrative framework weak on analysis (Land, 1994, pp. xix-xx). The guardian of the legacy of Ellen White during this era was her grandson, Arthur L. White, who broadened the spread and accessibility of his grandmother's papers through new E. G. White research centres and the creation of a General Conference Archive open to outside researchers, while simultaneously zealously protecting that material from being accessed by the 'wrong' hands, thus preventing much investigative historical research.

One historian managed to act as a bridge between the apologists of the mid-century and the new wave historians who would follow. Richard Schwarz's 1964 doctorate on the controversial sometime Adventist leader John Harvey Kellogg was

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published in several editions. He specialised in the history of the Adventist church, writing the standard denominational history textbook for Adventist colleges, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (1980). A revised edition with updates by Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (2000), remains the best work of its kind. Schwarz mentored the newer generation emerging in the 1970s, helping to moderate some of the conflicts generated by their research, for example negotiating to make a new study of Ellen White less emotive. While retaining the support of church administrators, he nevertheless helped the younger historians who were changing the shape of Adventist historiography (Butler, 2008, pp. 24-25, 27-28).

Later twentieth-century professional dialogues

A professional historical approach to issues began tentatively in the 1950s as university-educated historians took up positions in Adventist institutions. From 1969, scholarly debate within the church found a platform through the journal *Spectrum*, and to a lesser extent *Adventist Heritage* and *Adventist Today*, which offered forums that more official church papers, having a (de facto) imprimatur, were reluctant to host. Recent Adventist approaches demonstrate more awareness of the complexities of history, are less likely to assume the perspective of God, and are more open to alternative and non-linear explanations of events. However, the work of these historians is contested by some lay people, church administrators and even some historians, out of fear that new interpretations will threaten established beliefs. The conflicts generated have led to casualties among Adventist historians.

The first serious critical scholarly analysis of Adventist history took place over the role of Ellen White, beginning in 1970, with a cluster of articles in the Autumn 1970 issue of *Spectrum*. Donald McAdams characterised Adventist historiography as having been through three typical generations: the energetic and committed founders; the second generation which idealised the first generation and interpreted them conservatively; and finally the third generation, which feeling safe in a heritage that stretched back beyond living memory, could question the givens more easily (McAdams, 1980, pp. 27-28). Early critics of Ellen White were polemic rather than scholarly, while her defenders from the 1920-1960s were generally well-researched apologists rather than analysts. From 1970, a different origin and purpose was distinguishable. Frederick E. Harder wrote of Ellen White, “She was not writing history, she was interpreting it,” adding that, “the history was learned by ordinary means, but the activity of God in the historical situation was

seen by revelation” (McAdams, 1980, pp. 28-29). The research of the next ten years—though not always the debate surrounding it—fitted that basic model.

McAdams considered that what distinguished the modern debates from those of Ellen White’s time was a desire “not to tear down, but to understand.” Unlike her contemporary critics, writers like Roy Branson and Harold Weiss wanted to make White more influential, “but they insisted upon objective scholarship and a critical examination of sources” (McAdams, 1980, p. 29). Debate between William S. Peterson, W. Paul Bradley, John W. Wood and Ronald Graybill in the early 1970s, centred on her use of history, but occasionally became personal (McAdams, 1980, pp. 29-31).

However, this was merely the prelude to more significant Adventist historiographical research. Ron Numbers, already influential in church historical research, initiated a major shift with his seminal study of the health writings of Ellen White. Numbers refused to begin with presuppositions about divine inspiration, restricting himself to what he called more objective, historical criteria (Numbers, 2008, xxxvii). He concluded that some of White’s inspired ideas were in fact borrowed from popular contemporary proponents of health reform, and that she changed her ideas over time (Land, 1994, p. 94). His major book, *Prophetess of Health* (1st edition 1976), sent shock waves through academic and administrative church circles. *Time* magazine commented on the stir it created, while the church’s official paper, *Review and Herald*, editorialised that it did not challenge mature faith. Numbers’ work was endorsed by respected Adventist scholars as a “thoroughly researched and clearly written ... first-class piece of historical scholarship” (McAdams, 1980, p. 35). Several Adventist historians and church administrators attempted to tone down its conclusions, while at the same time tacitly accepting that Numbers was essentially correct, though a detailed rebuttal of many of its points was published by the Ellen G. White Estate, with historian Richard Schwarz noting Numbers’ lack of critical scrutiny of sources hostile to White (Schwarz, 1976). Graybill, who had actually helped Numbers with his research, was co-opted as the defender of the church’s traditional representation of White (Butler, 2008, pp. 14-17). The ensuing debate opened up the tensions that arise when the historian-believer writes on issues involving divine interaction with humanity (McAdams, 1980, pp. 31-34). Since the activity of God is not a matter subject to the usual rules of historical evidence, faith and historical methodology clash. However, the political fallout helped move Numbers from a professing Adventist

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to agnosticism. The debate he began has rumbled on for decades, with another historian, Gary Land, courageously labelling the church's official response as "inadequate," and calling on the church to review its tacit support of the inerrancy of White's inspiration (Land, 1994, p. 95; Land, 1978, pp. 51-55). Many who challenged the status quo were forced out of church employ or left before they were pushed, including Petersen, Weiss and Branson from Andrews, and Jonathan Butler, Vern Carner and Numbers from Loma Linda University. Graybill himself, attempting to walk the fine line between faithful history and administrative favour, eventually fell foul of the latter and was transferred out of the sensitive position in the White Estate to other church employment. McAdams survived for a while, but later also left denominational work (Numbers, 2008, pp. xvii-xviii). As in the time of Daniells, some leaders feared that the revelations would cause undue consternation among the church constituency, and Arthur White led the defence with a six-volume biography of his grandmother that drowned most of the major issues in a treacle of minutia. But it was not all bad news from the organised church: beginning in the 1980s the new Director of the Ellen G. White Estate, Robert Olson, promoted a more open approach to accessing sensitive archival documents. Meanwhile, Numbers' work was decisive in motivating Adventist historians to examine aspects of Adventist history with a new scholarly candour, which gained momentum with a series of *Spectrum* articles in 1979-1980.

Benjamin McArthur made an important contribution to the debate with his article, "Where are Historians Taking the Church?" published in *Spectrum*, November 1979. He observed that the professional historians were no longer the guardians of tradition, but rather had evolved into social critics (McArthur, 1979, pp. 9-10). The historical methodologies they used were different from the historical approaches of earlier Adventist writers, leading to conflict over vastly different conclusions. He made overt the problem for historians of faith, stating that "The discipline's insistence on finding causal explanation within the temporal realm heightens the problem, for it seemingly counters the assumption that God acts directly in the affairs of humanity," noting that God's leading was not susceptible to historical methodology (McArthur, 1979, p. 11).

McArthur considered that the impact of this new wave of historical research on Ellen White could adversely affect her standing as an inspired writer. He feared the process underway in Adventism might follow that of the Jewish community, where thinking shifted from blind belief to one of secularisation.

Historical scrutiny could lead to a more tentative attitude to White's writings as inspired and prophetic, losing their normative authority. On the other hand, it would move Adventism closer to its tradition of rationalism, claiming that truth could bear the closest scrutiny (McArthur, 1979, pp. 12-13). The paradox was that many Adventists would struggle with the tension between traditional views of White's inspiration and the findings of research that showed sources other than visions for many of her cherished advocacies. But while these tensions were real, there was no going back to the former, simple ways. However, McArthur considered that relatively little of the revisionist work had filtered down to the grassroots, and he speculated that conservative attitudes could prove too resilient to change (McArthur, 1979, p. 14). Time has shown that this forecast was not too wide of the mark: a Fundamentalist attitude to White's inspiration waxes and wanes, but still remains prevalent in many church circles, while the debate has created a church with a much greater diversity of views on White's role than ever before (McArthur, 2008, pp. 45-56).

The late Gary Land was a pioneer among professionally-trained historians in the church, seeing himself as a researcher rather than just a teacher, and also acting as mentor to many, including McArthur (McArthur, 2015, p. 7). He saw history as being at the heart of Adventist identity. Land wrote a major article exploring the development of historiographical consciousness in Adventism, drawing similar conclusions to McArthur. Land considered that the debate in studies about Ellen White, though uneven in quality, was healthy, prompting further scholarship which eventually asked whether a distinctive Adventist approach to history could exist. This philosophical debate essentially turned on whether "the rationale of all history should be illuminated by ecclesiastical history and not vice versa," as proposed by one conservative historian (Schwantes, 1970, p. 139). Numbers stated his preference for "honest agnosticism" as preferable to "pious fraud," while others like Land refused to accept unhistorical subordination (Land, 1980, p. 97). Land, in comment:

pointed out that the traditional way of describing God's hand in history implied an almost deistic separation of God and the world, whereas the Bible presented God as both immanent and transcendent. This meant, then, that God is always active in history. But because, in the light of revelation, some events are more meaningful than others, the Christian historian, rather than emphasizing God's intervention, will seek to understand the meaning of events within a Christian framework

(Land, 1980, pp. 96-97).

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Land identified further study that needed doing, including work on institutional history, twentieth century history, and intellectual history. He argued that Adventist history also needed to be done by non-Adventist historians, editing the volume *Adventism in America: A History* by a non-Adventist publisher. There was also a need to take seriously the connection between history and philosophy, and the need to write sound history for popular audiences. Land wrote, “if we are to survive and make our research understood, we must be able to articulate the relationship between critical history and religious belief.” He also called on historians “to engage theologians and denominational administrators in dialogue about the meaning of our history and its implications for our beliefs and practice” (Land, 1980, pp. 98-99). His book *Teaching History: A Seventh-day Adventist Approach* (2001) is a fascinating study of the philosophical issues arising out of the engagement of Adventism and history, in which he argued that the nature and shape of a specifically Adventist philosophy of history was not the methodology as much as the philosophical emphasis and focus. He is credited with having helped “nudge our denomination toward intellectual self-scrutiny.” Despite a wavering commitment from church leadership “to this uncomfortable endeavour,” Land was “to the end persuaded that only the examined religious tradition was worth embracing.” (McArthur, 2015. p. 9)

Another historian reaching a broader audience has been George R. Knight, whose studies into Ellen White’s educational philosophy led to research into her sources, methodology and authority. As a historian, he has written extensively on White, as well as on broader Adventist history, theology and education, showing a continuing intimate connection between Adventist belief and history, and its role in the classroom. A prolific writer, many of his books have targeted a more general Adventist readership while still being grounded in sound scholarly principles, achieving a higher popular profile than probably any other Adventist historian. He has demonstrated that a nuanced understanding is compatible with strengthening trust in the church, especially for the growing numbers of highly educated Adventists, and hopes that a better historical understanding can help heal some of the divisions within the church (Knight, 2007a). One historian described him as having, “the gift for synthesizing the devout tradition with the critical one” (McArthur, email to author, March 28, 2014).

The late Arthur N. Patrick had a significant influence on the shaping of Adventist historical thought. Like others, he found a deeper respect for White through a more academically rigorous

investigation of her work. He was particularly noted for the moderation with which he propounded his ideas, thus becoming the embodiment of the phrase, ‘a gentleman and a scholar.’ What Patrick brought to the debate was the capacity to lovingly and respectfully work alongside those who at times violently disagreed with him – a capacity that was evident in the founders of Adventism but that seems too often to have been lost along the way. He wrote of a need:

to hear actively the voices that derive from differing convictions, including the enthusiastic participants and affirmative supporters in Fundamentalist/Evangelical and (in particular) Adventist circles. Others’ voices are also crucial, especially those of the ardent cautioners within each of these communions who express concerns, formulate critiques, and lay charges. However, the quest to understand will be helped most of all by the analysts who offer historical, biblical, theological, sociological, and other interpretations that point beyond the partisanship of apologetics and the rhetoric of controversy toward comprehensive understanding and constructive action

(Patrick, 2007, p. 2)

Through the Ellen G. White Research Centre at Avondale College, Patrick fostered others in genuine scholarly research into Adventist history. His activities also caused ripples, and he was eased out of the Directorship of the centre into other fields of ministry that offered less scope for troublesome historiography. Patrick graciously took this in his stride and, especially with the freedom of retirement, continued his incisive yet inclusive scholarship.

It is impossible to do justice in a relatively short article to the wide range of contributions being made by current Adventist historians in Adventist studies, but a few may represent the rest. Three European scholars, Ingemar Lindén (1978, 1982), P. Gerard Damsteegt (1989) and Kai Arasola (1990), have made excellent contributions on Millerism in its social context, while Englishman Bryan W. Ball has contributed a number of well-reviewed works tracing the origins of the distinctives of Adventist faith, particularly eschatology, sabbatarianism and conditional mortality, among Puritan thinkers of the late Tudor and Stuart periods, two centuries and more before Adventism adopted them. New Zealander Gilbert Valentine’s work, particularly *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011), has demonstrated a candid evaluation of thorny issues in Adventist history, while Douglas Morgan’s (2001) work includes significant analysis of Adventism’s changing approach to the church’s relationship with the state, especially on participation in war. Institutional maturation is evident in the Review and Herald’s Pioneers series, which “marks an

important commitment of a church publishing house to careful historical scholarship. It represents the clearest example of academic scholarly values informing works of history as anything the church has produced” (McArthur, email to author, March 28, 2014). The relationship between historians and organisation is not all smooth sailing, for tensions surface from time to time, but it is evident that rigorous, honest scholarship can flourish within the organised church.

Two examples of the growing confidence and sophistication of Adventist historiography are the *Ellen G. White Encyclopaedia*, and *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, both published in 2014. The first began as an initiative of Knight in 2000, and includes a comprehensive suite of contributions from about 180 scholars, with much impressive new research, and was published by Review and Herald. The second, from Oxford University Press, commenced as ‘The Ellen White Project’ in 2009. Bringing together sixty-six world-class specialists from the Adventist world and the wider academic community in Adventist and American religious history, it has drawn more deeply on primary sources than ever before, developing a richer dialogue between a genuine diversity of scholarship. The conference, and the resulting book, revealed a wide consensus that has developed regarding the historical Ellen White. The volume has given Adventists and the scholarly world a fresh opportunity to foster a mature, sustainable understanding of White among believers and the general community, especially that of North America, and sets a precedent for sound scholarly engagement across religious and ideological lines on broader issues of Adventist history.

The contemporary Adventist church has a new opportunity to transcend the unnecessary conflicts and the false assumptions about its ‘mother’ that have been both pervasive and destructive in the past (Patrick, 2010; Reynaud & Patrick, 2011, pp. 5-18). Naturally, this has come with challenges. Adventism’s origins have fostered two conflicting cultural characteristics: a huge respect for learning and a deep suspicion of higher education. There are those who push for a return to more simplistic interpretations of Ellen White as the only safe way of ensuring true spiritual integrity. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has demonstrated that sound historical methodology and a firm commitment to Adventism’s historical aims and beliefs are highly compatible.

Conclusion

It is apparent that Adventism has had changing views on history. Its founders considered history to be relatively simple and definitive, an apologetic tool for proving their interpretation of biblical prophecy.

Early Adventist writers did not see themselves as writing history; instead they subordinated history to religion. They considered this to be the appropriate relationship between the two. Over one hundred and fifty years later, Adventist historians have adopted a more diverse range of views. While some saw themselves as maintaining the traditions of apologetics, others tackled the difficult issues that arose when modern historical methodology was applied to sensitive areas of Adventist faith and tradition. The result is a growing body of history that identifies and recognises the complexities of the issues. The newer history is open to alternate explanations and different perspectives, and is more aware of the problem of trying to link human events to the actions of God.

An awareness of how the Adventist church has understood history helps inform current teaching about the origins and development of the organisation. This in turn promotes a better awareness of contemporary debates and suggests strategies to engage in meaningful discussion without resorting to divisive judgments. **TEACH**

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