

WHY DO WE NEED Adventist History?

By Ron Graybill

Suppose you lost your memory. You didn't know your name, didn't recognize your spouse or children. You didn't know where you grew up or what church you belonged to. You didn't remember anything. Who would you be?

You would be, quite literally, nobody. Why? Because you are what you remember. That is also true of groups of people and

Dr. Ron Graybill is Assistant Professor of History at Loma Linda University, Riverside, California, and editor of Adventist Heritage. He formerly served for a number of years as a researcher at the Ellen G. White Estate at the General Conference Headquarters in Washington, D.C.

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nations as well as churches. That group memory is called history.

It Defines Our Identity

That's the first reason Adventist history is important: it helps us know who we are as people. Our

history makes us different and distinctive, it gives us a common bond and helps us identify with one another. We share the same memories, we admire the same heroes, and are embarrassed by the same failures.

It's Interesting

Adventist history is also worthwhile because it's interesting. Joseph Bates, cabin boy, fell overboard into the water where for days a large shark had been following his ship. That one day the shark happened to swim on the other side of the ship.¹ The same Joseph Bates, Adventist preacher, later

J. N. Loughborough

waded through deep snow up to 40 miles to find the scattered believers in the third angel's message.² These stories add color, excitement, and drama to a classroom or youth group. They charm us as adults. Interest attracts us, interest holds us.

It Instructs Us

In addition to identity and interest, Adventist history provides us with instruction. A. T. Jones was a brilliant preacher of righteousness by faith, as well as a zealous advocate of religious freedom. But Jones was an extremist. He went too far. He not only wanted the state to refrain from passing religious legislation like Sunday laws, he also wanted churches to refuse to accept tax exemptions on their properties.³ When he was corrected by Ellen White and resisted by more sensible church leaders, he turned against the church. As a negative example, Jones helps us avoid extremes and arrogance.

It Provides Insight

Finally, Adventist history offers us insight. For years, Ellen White's counsel in the *Testimonies*, volume 9, was a stumbling block to black people. There she advised us to maintain separate churches for white and black believers. People wondered, How could a messenger of God be so racist?

Then we began to explore the history of the times. We discovered that Mrs. White wrote at a time when racial tensions and violence

were at an all-time high, a time when any misstep by Seventh-day Adventists would have had serious consequences. It was not just to

Uriah Smith

advance the third angel's message among white people that she counseled the temporary expedient of separate churches. It was to avoid sacrificing the very lives of black believers as well. Even as she gave the counsel, she made clear that her advice was of a temporary nature, meant to meet a specific crisis.⁴ So Adventist history offers us insight into the meaning of inspired counsel.

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Why Do We Need Historians?

While history itself serves these useful functions, we also need historians to insure the integrity of the process. We have traditionally expected Adventist history to provide us with faith-confirming stories and evidence of God's leading in the past. Then along come modern Adventist historians who tell us that some of those stories aren't quite accurate. Can such "debunking" ever be a good thing?

This is not an idle question. Where once we looked on the literary beauty of Ellen White's writings as a clear evidence of divine guidance, we now know that Mrs. White drew some of those beautiful passages from other writers. We know also that she had literary assistants who polished her prose.⁵

Where once we believed that our pioneers were all sensible, balanced people who fought valiantly against the fanaticism of some of

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approach to address the needs in this area of the curriculum:

1. At the elementary level serious attempts should be undertaken to make geography a subject in its own right, not just a part of the social-studies curriculum. Further, a consecutive and expanded curriculum should be developed covering the major aspects of the subject.

2. At the academy level we should offer a series of courses in general world geography, physical geography (sometimes called earth sciences), and cultural and human geography. The emphases in all these courses should include the work of the church, denominational problems and possible solutions relating to geography, and general knowledge of the organization of the world church.

Each senior college in North America should develop at least a minor in the subject area of geography, building on the base of new courses in the academies, while at the same time helping those new to the discipline to achieve a standard of excellence.

The church can enhance the attractiveness of such curriculum changes by using graduates' talents to the greatest extent possible, both on the active payroll and as consultants. This would help advance the denomination's goal of spreading the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; and would help us avoid many costly mistakes, both in human and financial terms.

Better geography education is a *must*. Every teacher, from kindergarten through graduate school, needs to sound an alarm for improved geographic education at all levels. □

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¹ Editorial by Gilbert Grosvenor, President of the National Geographic Society, in *National Geographic Magazine* (January 1988), n.p.

² Quoted in Harm J. de Blij, *Geography, Regions and Concepts* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 5th edition, 1988), p. vii.

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their former Millerite friends, we now know that the family of J. N. Andrews were themselves subscribers to the "no-work" fanaticism after the Great Disappointment.⁶

Dangerous Times

These are dangerous times for Adventist history. A generation of Adventists, reared on faith-confirming stories, are finding out that those stories don't always stand up to careful examination. Some react by dismissing the stories, and hence an important part of their identity. Others dismiss the troublesome historians—and thus begin to split the community of faith.

Disappointments over childhood "stories" may seem trivial until we realize what a powerful role stories play in the shaping of a person's identity and belief system. If the stories prove not to be "true" in quite the sense we thought, we are tempted to reject not just the story but also the storytellers, i.e., the authority figures in our past who helped shape our beliefs.

Once again, however, an analogy from personal growth and development can be helpful. As children, we see our parents as all-powerful and all-wise. When we are teenagers, they seem to be bumbling hypocrites. After we finally mature they seem human: imperfect to be sure, but much wiser than they

In the childhood of American history, for instance, Abraham Lincoln was "The Great Emancipator," a champion of human dignity and human rights—the man who freed the slaves.

Then, during the 1960s at the height of the civil-rights movement, Lincoln was seen as "just another white racist," a man who, during his 1858 Senate campaign denied any belief in racial equality and said he would refuse blacks the privileges of citizenship.

More recently, as Lincoln has been compared to others of this time we have come to understand his racial views more fairly. He was not a 1960s-style white liberal, but he was a man ahead of his times who held that slavery was a moral evil and took steps, when he could, to eradicate it.

Perhaps in Adventist history we are suffering through the same rites of passage. We learn, for instance, that the story of Ellen White holding the Big Bible was never placed in print by James and Ellen White. Indeed, it was not printed anywhere until nearly 50 years after the event. When it did appear, in Loughborough's sermon at the 1893 General Conference, it was obviously confused with the story of her holding a smaller Bible in Randolph, Massachusetts.⁷

So, the traditional account of the Big Bible was handed down through the family, and many Adventists might wonder, as did A. G. Daniells, how much of the story is original and how much "crawled into" the original story.⁸ But what about that Bible in Randolph, Massachusetts? In that story, Mrs. White pointed to texts she could not see and quoted them correctly. This time, however, we have an eyewitness account. So we do have a direct account of a Bible-holding story, one just as miraculous.

Or consider the story of the boat that came back. Mrs. White herself tells how, on a trip by sailboat to West Island off the Massachusetts coast, she, H. S. Gurney, and others were caught in a violent storm. It seemed they were doomed, but a brief vision assured Mrs. White that they would not be lost. Their cries were heard from the island and they were rescued.⁹

One children's book continues the story, however.¹⁰ In the embellished version, the sailboat, which was borrowed, was lost. When Gurney returned to confess the accident to its owner, he discovered the boat had found its own way home!

Unfortunately, a careful check of the sources reveals that the story of the boat finding its own way home

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was an entirely separate incident, a personal experience of Gurney alone. So the historian has to separate the two stories in order to maintain the integrity of both.¹¹

Guardians of Memory

Historians then, are the guardians of a people's memory. Without them we would wander farther and farther away from reality. Our history would be less and less useful in binding us together because it would become increasingly distorted by the biases of small interest groups within the larger community.

We need Adventist history then, for identity, for interest, for instruction, and for insight. And we need Adventist historians to maintain the integrity of the process.

Ellen G. White summarized well the value of denominational history when she wrote, "The past history of the cause of God needs to be often brought before the people, young and old. We need often to recount God's goodness and praise Him for His wonderful works."¹² □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Joseph Bates, *Autobiography* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Pub. Assn., 1868), p. 25, 26.

² Joseph Bates to Bro. White, *Review and Herald*, vol. 2 (February 17, 1852), p. 80.

³ George Knight, *From 1888 to Apostacy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1987), pp. 124-127.

⁴ Ron Graybill, *Ellen G. White and Church Race Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1970).

⁵ Warren H. Jones, "Ellen White: Prophet or Plagiarist? Closed Windows or Open Doors?" pp. 5-12; "Literary Thief or God's Messenger?" pp. 13-16; "Human Thoughts or Divine Truths?" pp. 16-19, *Ministry*, 55:6 (June 1982).

⁶ Ron Graybill, "J. N. Andrews: Family Man," in Harry Leonard, ed., *J. N. Andrews: The Man and the Mission* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1985), pp. 14-41.

⁷ Ron Graybill, "Ellen G. White and the Big Bible" (unpublished paper). For a lively rejoinder to my paper on the Big Bible, see A. L. White, "The Witness of the 'Big Bible,'" White Estate Document File #81b. For an account of the holding of a large Bible in Randolph, Mass., see Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2 (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1858), pp. 78, 79.

⁸ Section entitled "Bible Conference of 1919," article, "Use of the Spirit of Prophecy in Our Teaching of Bible and History," *Spectrum*, 10:1 (May 1979), p. 28.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882, 1945), pp. 23, 24.

¹⁰ Bonnie Blue Campbell, *The Time the Boat Came Back* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1976).

¹¹ H. S. Gurney to Dear Charlie, c. April 20, 1896, White Estate Document File #193. (DF #3147 at A.U. White Estate).

¹² White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 6, p. 365.

WHY TEACH CULTURAL HISTORY?

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James Harvey Robinson, saw such study as a means of releasing us from the bonds of prejudice and tradition. Advocating "the New History," he wrote:

Contemporary religious, educational, and legal ideas are not the immediate product of existing circumstances, but were developed in great part during periods when man knew far less than he does now. Curiously enough our habits of thought change much more slowly than our environment and are usually far in arrears. Our respect for a given institution may be purely traditional and have little relation to its value, as judged by existing conditions.²

Therefore, Robinson concluded:

We must develop historical-mindedness upon a far more generous scale than hitherto, for this will add a still deficient element in our intellectual equipment and will promote rational progress as nothing else can do.³

While recent scholars do not exhibit Robinson's confidence in progress, they have continued to champion the relativism of his arguments. Allan Bloom summarizes the current dominant attitude:

History and social studies are used in a variety of ways to overcome prejudice. We should not be so ethnocentric, a term drawn