

## **ELLEN WHITE'S ANTIPODEAN EXILE, 1891-1900: REFLECTIONS ON HER AUSTRALASIAN YEARS**

Ellen White (1827-1915) was born and raised in the New England State of Maine during an era that did not favour extensive travel by women. However, from 1844 until 1909 she itinerated in the United States and elsewhere. What began as New England travels in the 1840s continued until 1909 when, during a five-month final journey across America, she spoke on seventy-two occasions in twenty-seven different places. Earlier than that, two periods of overseas service aggregated almost eleven years. From August 1885 to August 1887 she lived in continental Europe and made repeated trips to England as well as visiting Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The next four years were spent back in the United States, residing in Healdsburg and Battle Creek but travelling much and also preparing *Patriarchs and Prophets* and *Steps to Christ* for publication. Then came her second and longer overseas venture, December 1891 to August 1900, nearly nine years in the Southern Hemisphere. Ten months of that pioneering effort was invested in New Zealand, the other ninety-five months were devoted to Australia.

### **Exiled or Invited?**

Ellen White helped Seventh-day Adventists envision an outreach to Australia as early as 1875, but a further decade passed by before Stephen Haskell led ten other believers (five men, two women and four children) from San Francisco to the Antipodes. During 1890, some 1500 American Adventists crowded a San Francisco wharf for the dedication of a mission vessel, named imaginatively after Pitcairn Island. As it sailed amongst the islands of the South Pacific and to New Zealand and Australia, the *Pitcairn* aptly symbolised the sacrifice and effort required to plant Adventism in a vast new region. At the General Conference session of 1891, Ellen White received an urgent call to visit the new mission field of Australasia. November 12 that year, on a San Francisco wharf, some twenty-five friends farewelled Ellen, her widowed son William and her three literary assistants, as they boarded the *SS Alameda*. (Elder George and Mrs Nellie Starr joined the expedition in Honolulu.) By Ellen White's sixty-fourth birthday the ship was almost to the islands of Samoa; on December 3 the group visited Auckland, New Zealand. At seven on Tuesday morning, December 8,

the *Alameda* sailed into Sydney Harbour, arguably one of the finest and most beautiful harbours in the world. Australia consisted of six widely separated, competing colonies of England. European settlers had arrived in the oldest and largest colony, New South Wales, only 112 years previously.

The records are clear: Ellen White was invited to the lands Down Under and she chose to accept the invitation. Why, then, is it sometimes implied that she was exiled there? A longer look at the historical context illumines the situation.

*First of all, a major transition that began to gain strength in the 1870s was still occurring within Seventh-day Adventism.* A tiny remnant of marginalised Millerite believers in Christ's Second Coming had added to their Advent hope four other landmark doctrines and ably defended them in open debate with their Bibles open. They came to assume their mission was to bring a warning message to a Christian world. The way of salvation they proclaimed was well symbolised by the "tree of life" on which hung four commandments defining duty to God and six commandments encompassing duty to humankind. By 1883 this core focus was being changed to centre on the crucified Christ rather than the symbolic tree. However, in 1891 this shift in the church's position was still a threatening reality for many stalwart leaders and laity.

*Second, the Minneapolis General Conference of 1888 signalled a new phase of what would become a century-long debate over the way of salvation.* The discussion was not without serious threat to established parameters. Indeed, it pitted acknowledged pioneers of towering stature against rather obscure progressives who seemed somewhat lacking in the grace they advocated. It appeared to threaten landmark ideas, pillars of faith built by prayerful Bible study under Divine guidance. The year 1891 was still too soon to predict the outcomes of this traumatic conflict.

*Third, while in some respects Ellen White took a median position in the controversy, she articulated the necessity of change in unmistakable terms.* (For some true believers, change is one of the most threatening words in the dictionary.) She chose to ignore the appeals and even the warnings of the General Conference president that historic landmarks appeared to be under threat. She chose not to defend Uriah Smith's

authority in the realm of prophetic interpretation. She openly recommended that further Bible study should proceed within a climate of open enquiry. She even publicly defended the rather brash duo, Alonzo Jones and Ellet Waggoner, suggesting that it was in the mercy of God that they were bringing “a most precious message” to His people. She gave active support to the new emphasis in ministerial institutes and official publications. Thus, by 1891, the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith was being proclaimed widely and with greater clarity in the North American church.

Both sociologists and historians are apt to point out the likelihood of tensions between charisma and government within a religious movement. Seldom were prophets the preferred confidantes of the kings of Israel and Judah, from Saul to Zedekiah. Prophetism demands to be unfettered, whereas bureaucracy by its very nature must attempt to control. No church leader or administrative group could engineer Ellen White’s exile in Australia; her dependence upon Divine guidance was too specific for that to occur. However, Ellen White listened intently to the advice church leaders gave her. She understood well that some church leaders were not overwhelmed with grief that she was so far from Battle Creek, the hub of Adventist decision-making.

### **Problematic Elements in the Transfer**

Any analysis of the pro and con factors relating to Ellen White’s proposed sojourn in Australasia should have identified a range of problems. At sixty-four years of age, surely it was time for her to withdraw from pioneering initiatives. The mood of the time indicated that religious leaders with British accents were more acceptable in the colonies and thus more likely to be successful than North Americans. Ellen White had suffered two broken ankles in a Rocky Mountains accident and, because they were improperly set, she was permanently impaired. Not only was a hip giving her additional difficulty, for eleven months she would suffer from “malarial fever and inflammatory rheumatism” (the diagnosis she recorded) so severe that physicians predicted she might never walk again. Constantly she experienced the “humiliation” of being carried to a speaker’s position to deliver her message while sitting down. Her writing was often done with her upper right arm strapped to her body; even so, she frequently suffered intense pain. Beyond these personal issues was the fact that Australian society at the time was little attuned to a premillennialist message

announcing a supernatural end of the world as Christ returned in power and glory. (Millennialism had flourished in nineteenth-century North America but it was not popular in Australia.) By 1892 any hope of a constructive outcome from Ellen White's presence in the South Pacific must have seemed remote.

### **The Outcome in Retrospect**

Surprisingly, the outcome of Ellen White's Australasian sojourn was remarkable for its success. Her presence and involvement was a potent factor in enabling the church's membership to be multiplied by three. Not only did the fledgling publishing house grow significantly, the young church developed two other institutions, the Avondale School for Christian Workers and the Sanitarium Health Food Company. Healthcare initiatives were started, including Sydney Sanitarium, which for a century has exerted a powerful influence on behalf of the church. Missionaries were being readied and even sent to the vast mission fields of the Pacific Islands and Asia. Ellen White established a rapport with members and leaders that would influence the Australasian church profoundly throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

### **Why This Success?**

Accounting for this level of success is a worthy but elusive endeavour. Several observations present themselves as meriting consideration.

*Ellen White epitomised the "present truth" that was so precious to Adventism.* Prior to her arrival she was known through her writings as a living link with the sacred pain of 1844 and as one who had experienced the growth of "the little flock" into a named and organised body dedicated to sharing "the everlasting gospel" with every nation, tribe and language. She lived and travelled in the North Island of New Zealand and within the huge triangle of Australia bounded by Hobart, Adelaide and Rockhampton. The imagination of the Australasian constituency was engaged and the Adventist community became convinced of a compelling consistency in her writings, oral discourses and daily life. Her camp meeting addresses drew huge crowds quite out of proportion with the tiny Adventist membership. She fired the imagination of "the little remnant" about what might be done for the Adventist cause in the colonies. She did

far more than offer counsel about Christian education, health and mission. She was deeply involved in the tasks she enjoined, she gave liberally to the causes she recommended, she engaged in the neighbourhood service that she envisioned as basic for Christ's followers.

*Ellen White's Australasian years formed "the decade of Christ" in her literary endeavours.* The ethos of 1888 was already evident in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890) and *Steps to Christ* (1891). The former book begins with the words "God is love," while the latter declares in its opening sentence, "Nature and revelation alike testify of God's love." Her most encompassing task in both New Zealand and Australia was the "Life of Christ" project that yielded three enduring volumes: *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 1896; *The Desire of Ages*, 1898; *Christ's Object Lessons*, 1900. These tomes were the direct outgrowth of a theme intimated to her mind in 1848, reinforced in 1858 and thereafter addressed in *Spiritual Gifts*, *Spirit of Prophecy*, numerous periodical articles and manuscripts. Ellen White's contemporaries knew she was committed to an overarching theme, the great struggle between Christ and Satan, but that she laid no claim to total knowledge of the sublime subject or even skill with how to express it. So they helped her locate what seemed to them to be the best outline of Christ's life. They gathered into coherent form her previous writings on Jesus, His earthly life and teachings. They shared their insights from Bible classes at the Australasian Bible School. They knew in detail her fallible grasp of language and expression because they polished her drafts toward printer's copy. But, with Ellen White as the leader of a prophetic school, a core emphasis of 1888 came through powerfully: "To know God is to love Him." Cf. *The Desire of Ages*, page 22.

It seems perfectly natural that Australasians would respond positively to a person who aptly epitomised both "the present truth" and "the truth as it is in Jesus." But their attention was also caught and held by convincing evidence that *Ellen White was a person of practicality and common sense.*

Three decades after Ellen White's major health reform vision she was speaking at a camp meeting in a Melbourne suburb, during 1894. A Catholic woman who was also a temperance leader came to the front of the tent and confronted Ellen White over the

suffering caused to animals by meat eating. From that moment, so far as we know, Ellen White's occasional use of flesh food ended. This event helps us to understand such laments as that in *The Ministry of Healing*, pages 315-316: "The animals see and hear, and love and fear and suffer.... What man with a human heart, who has ever cared for domestic animals, could look into their eyes, so full of confidence and affection, and willingly give them over to the butcher's knife?"

While we are on the subject of animals we should notice Ellen White's response to a "barbarous practice" that she found amongst Australians. They confined a cow's head in a bail, she said, and tied a rope to the cow's hind led before drawing the leg back and milking the animal. Ellen White did more than score this "barbarous practice." She demonstrated that it was totally unnecessary, even for a cow that had been running wild on the Watagan Mountains. After she invited my grandfather to move his family to Cooranbong and work on the buildings at the Avondale School for Christian Workers she loaned him a tent to accommodate his family until he could build a house, and she loaned him a cow so his children would be provided with milk and cream. I have no recollection that he ever mentioned a need to employ the customary "barbarous practice" when milking the borrowed cow.

However, not all of Ellen White's farmyard creatures lived happily ever after. A family living in the township of Dora Creek were both poverty-stricken and ill, yet their prejudice against Adventist "peanut-eaters" was so strong that they declined to receive vegetarian food. Ellen White commissioned Sara McEnterfer to lop the heads off some of her chickens and prepare broth for the impoverished family. Interestingly, they received the broth and, ere long, the Adventist message.

Ellen White was an enthusiastic farmer on the side. Early in the piece she bought forty acres from the Avondale School and set about developing an orchard, vineyard, vegetable and flower gardens that would demonstrate the potential of the soil and the climate. While she was far too busy with travel, speaking and writing to do much outdoor work herself, she sustained a constant interest in the planting and growth of peaches, pansies and potatoes at her much-loved "Sunnyside."

My research for the just-completed centennial history of Sydney Adventist Hospital, founded as Sydney Sanitarium in 1903, leaves me with the conviction that its planting and its success are heavily dependent on Ellen White. More than that, she envisioned a health retreat in the village of Cooranbong, an ambitious enterprise that foundered after she returned to the United States. The saga of how she supported the sick in the geographical region of Cooranbong may be little known but it is impressive. Heroic efforts to save the life of a pre-school lad in 1899, my uncle, have lived in the family's memory for 103 years as another witness about the person who was exiled amongst us in the Antipodes. But in the larger scheme of things, Signs Publishing Company, Sydney Adventist Hospital and Avondale College are the known features of the public face Adventism in Australia. *Each of these institutions, like the Adventists' 1885 mission to the South Pacific, is in a large measure a product of Ellen White's innovative role within her community of faith.*

This observation prepares the way for a fifth assertion: *Ellen White's success in Australia was in considerable measure due to the fact that the believers amongst whom she lived and ministered were convinced God had called and equipped her to deliver counsel that met their needs.* This counsel covered a huge range of subjects and situations. Often it focused on the love of God, salvation by faith through the grace of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It could emphasise the need for an institution, help decide its location and the plan of its buildings. Sometimes it focused on personal dilemmas or interpersonal relationships. Sometimes it was bewildering, like the time she blew the whistle on student games such as cricket and tennis. At other times it was manifestly disturbing, as when Ellen White called for funds and gave beyond her means so that the young church might take another step forward in its mission.

Maybe the pervasive strengths of that five-phase mothering by Ellen White also created a dependence upon her that required the corrective experiences of the 1970s and the 1980s. Sociologists tell us that a wealth of new information can cause dilemmas of a serious nature within a religious communion. By 1976 the church had developed an Ellen G. White/Seventh-day Adventist Research Centre on the campus of Avondale College. The primary sources available in this institution enabled the careful checking of claims that deluged our people from the late 1970s onward as

photocopiers filled more efficiently the role of mimeograph machines and the slim fingers of ham radio reached more often across the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Ellen White's legacy in the Antipodes must be understood in the context of the turmoil and loss of the 1980s as well as in the more open and constructive climate of 2002.

### **Ellen White Studies in Historical Perspective**

We Australians owe a great deal to North Americans with reference to Ellen White studies. Some explorations that are not universally acclaimed by the corporate church in the United States have, even so, lasting significance. For instance, Ron Numbers has shown that Ellen White was an authentic member of a reformist society in her time and place, deeply interested in and responsive to the innovations that were related to her priorities. Currently an Australian consultant physician is proceeding with research that indicates the credibility of Ellen White's health counsels is more than double that of her contemporary health reformers. Don McAdams has painstakingly documented the way in which Ellen White related to Protestant historians in writing *The Great Controversy*. Walter Rea has offered useful evidence of her pervasive relatedness to Adventist and non-Adventist authors. Fred Veltman has established a firm foundation for the discussion of such sources, especially those that lie behind Ellen White's writing on the life of Christ. Alden Thompson has crafted a sustainable view of her inspiration. The journal *Spectrum* and the magazine *Adventist Today* have filled exploratory roles for students of Ellen White, often traversing terrain that, subsequently, the church has mapped in detail and adopted as part of its territory. Herbert Douglass, in an official tome, has brought the church another long step toward an appreciation of the varied sources that need to be understood by those who claim to present Ellen White's ministry in a responsible way. As Adventists we need every available fact that bears on the way God has led and taught us in our past history.

### **Conclusion**

It bears emphasis that Ellen White agonised over the call to Australia and felt she might be in Australia for only a few months. But she came to identify so strongly with the people and the mission of Adventism in the territory of the South Pacific Division

that she was loath to leave Australia and even wanted to return. What had seemed like a painful exile became, in the providence of God, a fruitful period of ministry. It also readied her for the dual needs she would meet at the 1901 General Conference: the requirement to confront the Holy Flesh heresy and the necessity to reorganise the structure of the church.

Perhaps a small but important subset of Ellen White studies has been too much neglected: the significance of her Australasian years. May these reflections serve to remind us that those 105 months of her public ministry will repay exploration by those who value the church, its fellowship, its mission and its prophetic messenger.

### **References for further study:**

**If this presentation was intended for an academic setting it would be footnoted in detail. But it is prepared for a Friday evening meeting with attendees that have access to relevant sources in the Loma Linda University and La Sierra University heritage resources, the second and third best collections in the Adventist world. (The most comprehensive collection is at Andrews University.) Twenty years ago I was privileged to read and comment on the manuscript of Arthur White's *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years, 1891-1900* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1983) and I read it again this month as part of the background required by this presentation. My interpretive framework is indicated in an M.Litt. thesis (1984), a Ph.D. dissertation (1991), a *Ministry* article (April 1991), an *Adventist Heritage* article (Spring 1993), and a cluster of papers posted on *sdanet.org* in the AT ISSUE section. A host of Ellen White letters and manuscripts add colour to this subject; see, for instance, Letter 127, 1896; Letter 89, 1900; Letter 174, 1900. As Australian input into Ellen White studies I value, in particular, master-level theses by Allan Lindsay (1978) and Robert Wolfgramm (1983), doctoral dissertations by Milton Hook (1978) and Michael Chamberlain (2002), and ongoing interaction with doctoral candidates Rick Ferrett and Bruce Manners.**

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