

## **ASDAH's Founding Fathers: A Look at Adventist Historians in the 1910s and the Development of Adventist Historiography**

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### INTRODUCTION

Last fall I received a phone call from Mei Ann Teo who came to the Loma Linda University's (LLU) Archives & Special Collections/White Estate Branch Office to do research for a theatrical production. After meeting with her it became obvious that she was far more concerned with those historians who left the church during the 1970s and early 1980s than she was about Ellen White. When I traveled up to Pacific Union College this past March for the grand debut, it was with great interest that I watched students and staff engage in a stimulating evening on how Adventists have interpreted Ellen White. Perhaps the most gripping moment of the play for me was the scene with a firing squad. In it a number of Adventist historians from the 1970s are summarily lined up and shot. The person doing the shooting was an unidentified representative of the White Estate, who as a part of the "establishment" is incapable of unbiased research, out of touch with the needs of church members, and stifles attempts by those who do try to reveal the *real* Ellen White.<sup>[1]</sup>

The purpose of my paper today is to move beyond the well-known and tragic debacle of Adventist historians who left the church in the 1970s and early 1980s to trace an earlier awakening of historical consciousness within Seventh-day Adventism some six decades earlier. Adventist historian, George R. Knight, in his recent collection of essays entitled *If I Were the Devil*, applies sociologist David Moberg's five stages of the organizational life cycle to Adventism. He labels the stages as: (1) incipient organization; (2) formal organization; (3) maximum efficiency; (4)

institutionalization; and, (5) disintegration. Knight suggests that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is teetering between stages three and four with the entrance of Adventism into stage three beginning at the 1901 General Conference Session. It was at this famous meeting when the church was reorganized into its present organizational structure. Knight in particular points to the arrival of “apologists” and “historians” as an example of the church’s arrival at stage three (“maximum efficiency”) with early players such as J. N. Loughborough, M. E. Olsen, A. W. Spalding, L. E. Froom, and F. D. Nichol. While many of these writers are well recognized for their apologetic literature, conventional historiography has pointed to the rise of a professional contingent of Adventist historians after the 1950s when Adventism began to generate its own graduate studies, and more specifically, to the 1970s when a notable body of historians began to analyze our Adventist past.<sup>[2]</sup>

### THE FORGOTTEN GENERATION

The application by Knight of Moberg’s five principles suggests that there might be an earlier generation of Adventist historians who existed in the early twentieth-century before the debacle of those who historians who left the church during the 1970s as vividly portrayed in the recent play at Pacific Union College. This generation might be more than a group of apologists as described by Knight and characterized by individuals such as J. N. Loughborough (ca. 1900-1920) and L. E. Froom (ca. 1940-1970) who were deeply involved in Adventist apologetics.

The 1919 Bible Conference provides an excellent window into the development of Adventist historical consciousness. Juxtapose after the death of Ellen G. White (1915) and World War I (1914-1918) but before the pervasive takeover of Adventism by Fundamentalism during the 1920s reveals a small body of Adventist historians who had begun to move beyond apologetics and sensed a real need for Adventism to become more historically conscious and who were trained in the critical methods of historical research.

The 1919 Bible Conference was the first academic conference to be held in Adventist history. An intentional effort was made by the planning committee to present both sides of

controversial issues. The meeting also embodied the best educated group to ever meet up to that point. Two of the denomination's first three individuals to obtain a Ph.D. were present, and several more had received Masters' degrees or were about to begin graduate training. One individual, J. N. Anderson, had studied at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago where he had received a Bachelor of Divinity degree. What is certain is that the issues discussed at this meeting were far more complex and nuanced than previously recognized. A major part of placing the historical and theological context and their impact upon the development of Adventist theology is the core of my doctoral dissertation.<sup>[3]</sup>

The 1919 Bible Conference was more than a theological meeting. It was a major pedagogical conference that included Bible and history teachers. The main Bible Conference occurred from July 1-19, 1919, and the Teachers' Council ran concurrently through the Bible Conference and extended beyond until August 9, 1919. While 90 percent of the extant transcripts reflect discussions during the "Bible Conference" there are some significant discussions in the few extant records from the educational portion of this event.

#### THE TEACHING OF HISTORY AND HISTORICAL METHOD

In two undated manuscripts that appear after the famous discussions about Ellen White on July 30, 1919 and August 1, 1919 focus on history. The first, entitled "The Application of the Principles of Historic Method" was led by C. L. Benson, and the second "Historical Method" was led by E. F. Albertsworth.<sup>[4]</sup> These two men and their presentations at the 1919 Bible Conference given a fascinating insight into Adventism's earliest generation of Adventist historians.

First, who were these two men?

Clement L. Benson (1882-1934) graduated from Union College in 1905. By 1906 he was serving as the secretary of the "young people's work" in the Central Union. He was a featured speaker at the 1910 denominational educational convention, which marked him as a rising star in educational circles. During the 1917-1918 school year he became acting president of Emmanuel Missionary College when O. J. Graf, his best friend and brother-in-law and college classmate

became ill. During that same school year he also became assistant secretary of the General Conference Education Department. By 1920 he had returned to Union College where he continued to teach history. It was while he was here that he earned an M.A. (1921) in history from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. His thesis was entitled “The French Revolution and the Church Property: The First Phase.” At the 1923 educational conference he organized the section on teaching history. In his later years he appears to have separated from denominational employment where he may have taught at the University of Arkansas.<sup>[5]</sup>

The second individual, Edwin Franklin Albertsworth (1892-1980), was at the time of the 1919 Bible Conference a history teacher at Washington Missionary College. He received an M.A. (1916) and Ph.D. (1918) from George Washington University. Soon after the 1919 Bible Conference he was attacked by a group of students for being too liberal. His employment was terminated. Afterward he spent the rest of his career teaching law at the University of Santa Clara in California.<sup>[6]</sup>

So what was significant about the two presentations they gave at the 1919 Bible Conference?

These two presentations indicate that at least two individuals had taken or were in the process of studying graduate level courses in history and historical methods. Albertsworth in particular had recently taken a graduate seminar in historical methods at John Hopkins University. The bulk of Albertsworth’s presentation was an overview of “historical method” and the influence of graduate seminars in the leading universities of the United States. It was as a result of these seminars, claimed Albertsworth, that the influence of French historiography was being felt over the previous 5 to 10 years in American schools like Columbia, Harvard, and Chicago. “I am convinced more and more,” he bemused, “that we ought to give courses in historical method in our own colleges. I think something has been done here this year by Professor [C. M.] Sorenson [another Adventist history teacher], . . . But I believe such a vital topic ought to be given more

consideration, especially by our advanced students.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Albertsworth’s overview of the historical method continued with a history of historical writing. Beginning with Herodotus, he noted that “men wrote under certain influences.” He noted the contribution of Thucydides whose criterion for truth was contemporary accounts. The list goes on through Polybius and Xenophon. Then on to Eusebius, the Middle Ages, and then up through the Renaissance. Albertsworth realized that historical consciousness had developed over time.

The second division of Albertsworth’s remarks concerned how students could find sources. First, monographs and reference works were a good place for students to begin. Students should be familiar with journals including the *Historical Review*, *English Historical Review*, *American Historical Review*, *Revue Historique*, *Revue des Questions Historiques*, *Yale Review*, and about a dozen additional journals. Students should have bibliographies of original sources. These sources could then be located in archives, libraries, and museums.

The third division of Albertsworth’s talk concerned the evaluation of sources once the source has been located. Students should be taught how to evaluate the reliability of a document (does it contradict itself?). Was the author an actual witness to the event? How trustworthy was he or she? He suggested several tests for determining reliability. As a general example of bias Albertsworth referred to the writings of J. H. Merle D’aubigne whose writings on the reformation had been used by Adventist writers (most notably by Ellen White) for decades. “I do not suppose any writer was under a greater bias than D’aubigne,” he stated. “We do not see him quoted so much any more.” The implication was clear that Adventists could and should use more reliable sources in their construction of history.

In conclusion, Albertsworth suggested that Adventists could benefit from teaching historical method to their students. W. E. Howell, secretary of the educational portion of the 1919 Bible Conference, probed Albertsworth about what was needed. The reply was simple: specialists were needed within Adventism who could access primary sources and make them available. Howell in particular referred to the example of J. N. Andrews whose extensive research was a

model for Adventist scholarship. A motion was then made that a group of Bible and history teachers take a tour of historical places in Europe and the Holy Land. The record notes that the motion was “instantly seconded” and “carried unanimously and enthusiastically.” Unfortunately there is no evidence that the tour ever materialized.

Despite the apparent failure of this tour in the wake of the 1919 Bible Conference, the presentation by Albersworth apparently “made a very strong impression” upon Adventist educational secretary W. E. Howell. “Of course I recognize,” remarked Howell, “that there are dangers as well as privileges connected with our pursuing learned research, but if we have not learned to avoid the dangers and pursue the legitimate, it is the wrong time now to learn it.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Benson’s talk on “the application of the principles of historic method to our own teaching work” appears to have occurred the next day after Albertsworth’s presentation. He placed particular emphasis upon the importance of “research work.” “I have thought for a long time” that this is “the weakest place in our denomination.” If we are attacked it will not be on the biblical side but on the historical side. In a reference to the recent war in Europe he stated: “We would look worse than some of those buildings over in France.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Benson was in particular concerned about the future leadership of the denomination in light of sermons that he listened to in church. We “do not set a good scholarly example to them.” Frequently he heard sermons that did not have any sources. We take it for example that these sources are authentic. Referring to personal experience, when he queried the preacher he would frequently get the response that the source was from some anonymous work. He challenged those present at the 1919 Bible Conference to do original research. He asked: how many at the 1919 Bible Conference had taken advantage of the opportunity to study at the Library of Congress and “get at original sources?”<sup>[10]</sup>

Benson was careful to temper his comments in light of concerns about “higher criticism.” He surmised that Adventists had been reluctant to embrace “historical method” for fear that it

“belongs to higher criticism.” Adventists could embrace this without being in danger of losing their faith.

Benson admonished those to study original sources. Research was needed into the early Adventist documents. Such research would help to resolve the question of the “shut door” lobbed against them by critics of the church. Another example was the “dark day” that W. W. Prescott had suggested was a mistake when Ellen White wrote that there were no clouds in the sky on the famous “Dark Day.” A newspaper was sent in, asserted Benson, that disagreed with Ellen White and “we flopped over and took another position.” “What right have Seventh-day Adventists to go and change a work like *Great Controversy* merely because some one newspaper makes certain assertions when we have never exhausted the field? This was a clear example of the failure of Adventists to do their own original research. “Until we, as a people, have investigated those different sources [primary source newspapers, pamphlets, and memoirs], we are not in a position to say very much about the dark day..”<sup>[11]</sup>

The real challenge, according to conferee C. A. Shull, was the remoteness of Adventist colleges to “big libraries.” Benson was particularly disappointed that at Union College their library acquisitions budget was \$7. It is “impossible for our school men to do very much work of this kind until we come in contact with the sources.” These sources were desperately needed for students in the classroom. He expressed his wish that eventually they could get to the place where they could gather primary sources on “critical periods of denomination history” so that they could have this “source material” for use in the classroom. “I believe the money spent in accumulating those documents would be money well spent.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Historical research entailed detailed and careful attention to these sources. Such work “requires brain fag, and a great deal of it.” According to *Websters’ Dictionary* “brain fag” means “undue taxation of the brain.” “I have longed for quite a time,” he surmised, “that our Bible and history teachers might have opportunity to do more research work. Each one should take some particular period and then pass on to others the result of his work. It should be submitted to

others. . . . I think we ought to be more brotherly. I wish we could form some sort of a society in order to stimulate ourselves to more good works.” A textbook of denominational history was needed. “If we school men don’t do it, can we expect our men in the field to do it?” Ultimately by doing this history teachers could help to build confidence in the truths of Adventism and build professionalism that would show in better sermons and publications within the church.<sup>[13]</sup>

### ADVENTIST TURN TOWARD FUNDAMENTALISM

Unfortunately the dreams of Albertsworth and Benson were not fully realized. Seventh-day Adventist history teachers and the “historical method” became especially suspect as Adventism became more Fundamentalist during the 1920s. While all of these reasons are not fully clear, those who were history teachers appear to have been on the front line of those who were pushed out of the church.

One reason that history teachers might have been targets is their degrees as the church moved away from degrees, and in particular those who had obtained such degrees from institutions perceived as not friendly to the church. General Conference president A. G. Daniells strongly pushed the Adventist church toward Fundamentalism citing recent Fundamentalist prophetic conferences as a model for the 1919 Bible Conference, and republishing Fundamentalist literature against worldly educational schools in Adventist journals as a justification for Adventist education. Daniells’ was known especially for discouraging promising young men from pursuing advanced degrees.

As part of this Fundamentalist shift within Adventism came a certain militancy characteristic of the wider historical movement. This militancy is particularly noticeable in personalities like J. S. Washburn and Claude Holmes who viewed the 1919 Bible Conference as a sell out by church leadership of traditional Adventist positions, most noticeably about the inerrancy of Ellen White’s writings. But both Washburn and Holmes with their vitriolic attacks became marginalized. More influential were individuals like B. G. Wilkinson and A. G. Daniells who expressed concerns that a group of teachers were using books by “infidel authors.” A group that



included C. M. Sorenson, H. C. Lacey, E. F. Albertsworth, S. N. Butler, B. G. Wilkinson, Stewart Kime, and F. L. Chaney were invited to an investigative meeting. The end result was a group of students who testified against Albertsworth resulting in an invitation for him to go to China as a missionary. This was the end of Albertsworth's career for the church. Benson at Union College does not appear to have had the same difficulties that Albertsworth had at Washington Missionary College. But this does not mean that other history teachers, especially H. C. Lacey who was prominent at the 1919 Bible Conference and who had also been one of Ellen White's literary assistants meant that even he would fall under suspicion.<sup>[14]</sup> In the end Benson's hope that Adventists not associate the virtues of "historical method" with "higher criticism" did not appear to have succeeded.

#### GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

While not as widely known, Adventism began to have a more critical and not just apologetic historical consciousness during the 1910s that disappeared as Adventism became militantly Fundamentalist. At the 1919 Bible Conference this small but significant group of historians became particularly noticeable, especially in two presentations by C. L. Benson and E. F. Alberstworth. In these two presentations several observations can be noted:

- (1) That historical research and the evaluation and use of original sources would enable the Adventist message to be presented in a much more credible way. Adventist schools had an obligation to not just teach history, but to equip Adventist students with the tools of historical research.
- (2) Primary source materials were needed. Teachers and students needed access to original research material. Adventist libraries needed more funds for acquisitions, and until then collections of primary source documents could be circulated. This was especially needed in researching Adventist history.
- (3) Teachers needed more training. They needed to learn the languages to research using original documents (when necessary). Adventist teachers could

benefit greatly by spending time in major research libraries, and they even suggested a study tour through Europe and the Holy Land.

- (4) Adventist historians should fellowship and encourage one another by circulating primary source materials and specializing in certain areas of history. Benson appears to have been an individual ahead of his time by suggesting that a society of Adventist historians needed to be developed.

Adventist historiography and historical consciousness can be accurately dated to within two decades of the 1901 General Conference session which George Knight designates as the starting point for the third phase (maximum efficiency) of Moberg's institutional life cycle. More work needs to be done about the pervasive influence of Fundamentalism within Adventism (and the contributions of Adventism upon Fundamentalism). As the recent play at Pacific Union College highlights, the tragic loss of historians during the 1970s can not be fully understood unless one studies the earlier awakening of historical consciousness during the 1910s. What is clear is that Adventism's "forgotten generation" of Adventist historians from this early period documents a strong push within the church toward higher standards in historical research and a professional body of historians that would not be realized for another five decades. One can only wonder how excited Benson might be today if he were to be able to participate in the present Association of Seventh-day Historians.

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[1] [Mei Ann Teo], *Red Books: A Play About Ellen White*. N.p., 2007. The play premiered at Pacific Union College on March 3, 2007. For a review of the play and an extensive discussion online see [www.progressiveadventism.com](http://www.progressiveadventism.com).

[2] George R. Knight, *If I Were the Devil* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2007), 28-29. For an extended application of Moberg to Adventism see: George R. Knight, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom: Confronting the Challenge of Change and Secularization* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995).

[3] My forthcoming dissertation is entitled: "A Historical and Theological Analysis of the 1919 Bible Conference and Its Significance for the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Theology," Ph.D. diss., Andrews

University, [2007?]. Chapter 3 describes the historical details of the 1919 Bible Conference as the first scholarly conference to be held in Adventist history. See also Appendix B which has biographical sketches of each of the participants with their individual academic achievements.

[4] E. F. Albertsworth, "Historical Method," Report of Bible Conference [hereafter RBC], n.d., 1281-1303.

[5] *Department of Commerce and Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920—Population*. Nebraska, Lancaster County, District 43, p. 7857; Meredith Jones Gray, *As We Set Forth: Battle Creek College & Emmanuel Missionary College* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2002), 191.

[6] E. F. Albertsworth, "The Political Aspects of the Protestant Revolution in France to the Edict of Nantes," M.A. thesis, George Washington University, 1916; idem, "The Genesis of the Edict of Nantes," Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1918; idem, *The Law of Labor Relations: Trade Disputes at the Common Law and Under Modern Industrial Statutes* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1925); idem, *The Law of Industrial Injuries at the Common Law, Under Employers' Liability Acts, and Workmen's Compensation Statutes: A Syllabus of Cases* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1925).

[7] RBC, 1281.

[8] RBC, 1303.

[9] RBC, 1274. The presentations by Benson and Albertsworth are inverted in the transcripts. Internal evidence suggests that Benson's talk occurred after Albertsworth's presentation, possibly a day or two later.

[10] RBC, 1274.

[11] RBC, 1276-1278.

[12] RBC, 1277.

[13] RBC, 1279.

[14] Minutes of the Board of Trustees, Columbia Hall, February 20, 1919, 1-2; Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of Washington Missionary College, February 10-15, 1920, 3-4. I am indebted to Doug Morgan for assistance in locating these records.