



The old Healdsburg College, Healdsburg, California.

D. M. Canright in Healdsburg, 1889: The Genesis of the Plagiarism Charge

Ron Graybill

The Christmas time Week of Prayer at Healdsburg College in 1888 was an occasion for sweeping revival. So eager were church members and students to confess their backslidings and testify to their new experience that meetings sometimes lasted until 10:00 P.M. The Sabbath service, beginning at eleven in the morning, continued until sundown without intermission. Early in January, 1889, Elder R. S. Owen, the Week of Prayer speaker, continued his preaching with an evangelistic series. Before long, thirty had requested baptism.

Perhaps it was only coincidental, but the local Protestant ministers chose this moment to invite D. M. Canright to travel all the way from Michigan and present a series of lectures based on his newly published book, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*. Their purpose was not to reach the Adventists of Healdsburg, as they believed they

would not be permitted to attend. Rather they hoped to show the larger community the "true inwardness of the SDA heresy."

Canright came in February, gave his lectures in the local theater, then repeated the performance in an eight-night-long debate with Elder William Healey. Canright renounced virtually every distinctive belief of Adventism, attacking the Sabbath, conditional immortality, the perpetuity of the law, the hope of the soon-coming Saviour, the sanctuary, and especially Ellen G. White's prophetic gift.

In the strength of their renewed Christian experience, Healdsburg Adventists seemed to have been troubled very little by Canright's attacks. They were not forbidden to attend Canright's meetings. Although few students went, most of the ministers attended, and a fair representation of lay persons showed up as well. For those who

did not attend, the local weekly paper gave extensive coverage to the lectures and subsequent debate.

For Adventists, Canright's obvious distortions, his bitter attitude, his sarcasm concerning things they held dear, and his unstable past career all helped weaken the impact of his criticism. The night after Canright's lectures ended, William Healey had a good audience in the Healdsburg church for his lecture on "The Mistakes of D. M. Canright."

Canright created quite a stir in the community. On the streets the people, two by two, half a dozen together, or in large crowds, talked of little else. Some believed that Adventists should be hooted out of town; others contended that Adventists had made the town.

As soon as it was announced that Canright was coming, E. J. Waggoner wrote the local newspaper a most ill-advised letter reviewing



D. M. Canright came to Healdsburg from Michigan to attack Adventism.

Canright's vacillating course of confession and contradiction, and claiming that once Canright left the SDA Church, he vanished from the scene as completely as a fallen star. Waggoner claimed that Canright's Baptist congregation in Otsego, Michigan, was thoroughly disgusted with him. The local clergy naturally sprang to Canright's defense, and solicited testimonials in his favor. Soon a flood of favorable comments appeared in the local paper. All this proved nothing, but it diverted attention from the theological strong points that Adventists were scoring on the Sabbath issue.

On Monday and Tuesday evenings, February 11 and 12, and then again in his debate with Healey, Canright loosed a torrent of

J. N. Loughborough helped to prepare for the public debate. He also spent considerable time defending Mrs. White's prophetic writings.



abuse against Ellen White. To him she was a false prophet because she worked no miracles. She was a false prophet because none of her predictions came true. She could not be inspired, as far as Canright was concerned, because she changed the wording of her messages and employed literary assistants to polish her rhetoric. Canright claimed that half of *The Great Controversy* was copied from the works of other writers. He charged the church with suppressing Mrs. White's early writings in which she taught the shut door. He ridiculed Adventists because they had expected the Lord to come long before. He sneered at the reform dress Mrs. White had advocated, and finally he concluded that Mrs. White was getting rich off her dupes, that she wore a hundred-dollar cloak, had much property, and was eager to get more.

All this time Ellen White was away in the East attending camp meetings and preaching, along with A. T. Jones, the message they referred to as "faith and the righteousness of Christ." But Mary Kelsey White, her daughter-in-law, was staying in Ellen White's home; and the Sunday after Canright's remark about Ellen White's immense wealth, she noticed that carriage and foot traffic past the humble dwelling was heavier than usual.

Mary Kelsey White subscribed to the Healdsburg *Enterprise* during the first three months specifically to keep posted on Canright's activities. She sent copies of all the relevant articles to her husband, W. C. White, who was in Battle Creek. She had read Canright's book and told Willie that she believed it was his duty to do so as well. She kept a scrapbook of newspaper articles about Canright.

J. N. Loughborough came up from Oakland on the same train with Canright. He attended most of the meetings, including those during which Canright attacked Ellen White and made the plagiarism charges. On February 12 and 13, he met with the local Pastor's Union to discuss terms for the debate. Although William Healey was chosen to debate Canright, J. N. Loughborough worked diligently in the background, studying the issues,

preparing material, and consulting with Professor Grainger, Elder McClure, and other local Adventist leaders.

During his debate with Healey, Canright renewed his plagiarism charges against Ellen White, and carelessly claimed that seven solid pages in *The Great Controversy* were lifted bodily from J. N. Andrews' *History of the Sabbath*. Healey, of course, demanded that that charge be sustained, and asked for a committee to investigate it. A committee was formed consisting of H. B. McBride, the local Presbyterian pastor; J. N. Ballhache, another non-Adventist; and J. N. Loughborough.

Loughborough wanted to focus the committee's attention exclusively on the "seven solid pages" issue, but was outvoted. Canright denied having made the statement in question, and added that if he did, it was a "slip of the tongue." Loughborough later produced copious proof that Canright had indeed made that charge. On the point of Ellen White's use of Andrews, the committee majority—two people—concluded that "on consecutive pages of her book" Mrs. White quoted largely of Andrews' ideas, "and in many instances his exact words." They disclaimed any judgment on her inspiration, but said they believed that she "had Elder Andrews' work before her when she wrote her visions and copied largely, both in ideas and language, from it." They did not make any statement about whether this was plagiarism.

Significantly, Canright, Loughborough, and the pastors in Healdsburg were all using Volume 4 of *The Spirit of Prophecy* and not the 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy*. The earlier volume was also called *The Great Controversy*. The first copies of the so-called 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy* had only come off the press in Oakland in early February, 1889, and they had not yet reached the field. The 1888 edition would have helped the Adventist case not only because it used quotation marks more liberally but also because it acknowledged using both Adventist and non-Adventist sources. That introduction was dated May, 1888,



William Healey was chosen to debate with Canright in a public meeting.



Heavy carriage and foot traffic passed Mrs. White's modest Healdsburg home curious to see if she really was wealthy.

but it was still not in general circulation in February, 1889.

Loughborough, therefore, did the best he could with what he had, and he did quite well. It appears that Loughborough was the very first one to publish Mrs. White's writings with those of another writer in parallel columns. This appeared in his minority report in the *Healdsburg Enterprise* on March 13, 1889. Continuing to maintain that Ellen White had copied seven solid pages from J. N. Andrews, Canright had submitted a list of correlated page numbers from the two books. Loughborough published the whole text of these pages to demonstrate the falsity of Canright's claims. The evidence did demonstrate that Mrs. White had made some use of Andrews' writings, but it certainly blasted Canright's contention that

Mary Kelsey White, Ellen White's daughter-in-law, was living in the White home in Healdsburg during the time of the debates.



Mrs. White had borrowed "seven solid pages."

Loughborough further argued that where Ellen White's account did parallel J. N. Andrews', they were both writing on matters of historical fact and must necessarily have stated very nearly the same thing if they both told the truth. Loughborough also anticipated another modern defense of Ellen White in that he urged that if Ellen White's use of Andrews' work constituted plagiarism, then we must charge the apostles and prophets with the same crime. He then cited several parallels in the Gospels and elsewhere. Loughborough denied that Mrs. White had taken ideas or reasoning from Andrews, although we may question both the necessity and the accuracy of this denial today.

But Loughborough was not done. He was now ready to present a case that he said was truly plagiarism. He lined up Canright's own book, *The Bible From Heaven*, dated 1878, with Moses Hull's volume by the same title, dated 1863. Canright's use of Hull was slavish, to say the least. Canright retorted in a later note in the paper that Ellen White claimed inspiration, while he did not. This, however, has nothing to do with the plagiarism charge. It is just as wrong for an uninspired writer to plagiarize as for an inspired writer to do so, especially when the uninspired writer is self-righteously accusing the inspired one of wrongdoing.

Canright further defended himself by claiming that James White had asked him to revise Hull's book for publication, since Hull's apostasy had made it impossible to use the material with Hull's name attached. If it were wrong, Canright contended, then James White was as guilty as he.

If it were wrong: That is just the point. Looking back on it now, it is apparent that neither Canright nor James White nor other Adventists thought it wrong for Canright to follow Hull's earlier work quite slavishly at many points. Canright even felt free to write in his preface that the book had been written "after extensive reading and careful thought upon the subject" that was being treated.

Canright also accused Ellen White of confusing Herod Antipas with Herod Agrippa I in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1. This charge did not seem to create as much interest as the one concerning plagiarism. Loughborough dismissed it, perhaps too quickly for our tastes, because Canright had publicly misquoted the passage in question.

One major area of confusion in the Healdsburg episode in 1889 had to do with concepts of inspiration. Whatever Canright's personal view of inspiration was, he and the local clergy tried to fasten a dictatorial view of inspiration on the Adventist defenders of Ellen White. Canright sarcastically remarked that "if God would give her [Ellen White] the words the first time she

would not have to correct it."

The Pastors' Union claimed that Healey had asked them to believe that "historical facts and even the quotations are given her in vision without depending on the ordinary sources of information!" Yet Mary Kelsey White noted in a letter to Willie: "Notwithstanding Healey's protests, Canright insisted that every word that Mrs. White writes is inspired." Here *inspiration* is apparently used as a synonym for *dictated* or *revealed*. So we simply cannot take Canright or the Healdsburg clergy as reliable witnesses as to what, in fact, Healey was teaching about Ellen White's inspiration.

Loughborough does not tip his hand on the inspiration issue. His contention that Mrs. White used only matters of historical fact from Andrews left him free later to operate out of a very narrow view of inspiration. His book *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists*, published only three years after this, may have been a partial reaction to Canright's attacks. In it, Loughborough stressed the miraculous in Ellen White's experience, and made her out to be a more predictive prophet than one would discover in her own published writings. The impact of Loughborough's historical writings is one of the important unexplored issues in Adventist history and in Ellen White studies.

The local pastors in Healdsburg had yet another parting shot. A week after Loughborough's minority report appeared, they published, in parallel columns, some stronger examples of Ellen White's use of sources, these taken from Uriah Smith, James Wylie, and Merle d'Aubigné. They claimed Healey had depicted Ellen White as a woman who read little besides her Bible, and proceeded to ridicule that contention. They declared Ellen White a plagiarist and professed great abhorrence for her failure to give the sources of her material.

The pronouncements of a hostile group of clergymen at the end of an acrimonious public debate can hardly settle the question of whether it was common practice for popular religious writers of the nineteenth century to borrow from

one another without giving credit. Naturally, under the circumstances, they were enormously exercised over the question of proper credit. It is also important to understand that, although Adventists were fully aware of these charges, although they were fully aware that Ellen White made use of other authors, it would appear that they were not unduly disturbed by these things.

In the new edition of *The Great Controversy* the view of inspiration is certainly not a verbal, or dictational, one. Mrs. White speaks of the thoughts being "embodied . . . in human language."

It seems likely that the arrival of the new edition of *The Great Controversy* helped place these things in context for Adventists. The view of Biblical inspiration put forth there is certainly not a verbal, or dictational, one. Mrs. White speaks of the thoughts being "embodied . . . in human language," and "expressed in the language of men." She spoke of how God "guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write. The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels," she said. "The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language." To the Adventists in Healdsburg, picking up this new book at just this juncture in their experience, these words must have had a special meaning.

Then too, Ellen White acknowledged and explained her own use of historical sources. She noted that "the great events which have marked the progress of reform in past ages are matters of history, well known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world; they are facts which none can gainsay." This must have recalled Loughborough's minority report, in which he argued that the

similarities were only in matters of historical fact.

"In some cases," Mrs. White continued, "where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, 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." How useful that statement would have been in the contention against Canright. How meaningful it must have been to Healdsburg Adventists.

Then Mrs. White continued: "In narrating the experience and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has been made of their published works." This would take care of the use of William Miller and his biographer. Then, as Healdsburg Adventists looked into the book, they found quotation marks inserted here and there. Opening the *Review and Herald* of March 19, 1889, the day before the Pastors' Union published the parallel with James Wylie's *History of the Waldenses*, Adventists found an advertisement for that very book. Certainly Ellen White must not have considered her use of other authors inappropriate or unethical, or she would have chosen some who were less well known.

The story of Canright's adventures in Healdsburg in 1889 should be both humbling and comforting to us in 1980. The pioneers' view of inspiration may have been more strict and narrow than some of us would entertain, but before we conclude that they were dishonest with the evidence before them, we need to understand just how they interpreted that evidence. At a minimum, this story shows that at least some of the questions with which we are dealing today are not new, and that the church survived them in the past. ■

Ron Graybill is currently working on a doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins University, on female religious founders and leaders.