

A Century of *Steps*

by Tim Poirier

[First published in the *Adventist Review*, May 14, 1992, with statistics updated for 2016.]

This year [1992] marks the centennial of one of the most circulated religious books ever, apart from the Bible—*Steps to Christ*, by Ellen G White. It was a surprising success from the start; within six weeks of its initial printing a third edition had already been issued.

Today Ellen White's most widely read book has been translated into [more than 165] languages, which makes it [one of] the most translated extrabiblical works in the history of literature.¹

Anyone who has read *Steps to Christ* knows that beneath the book's simple and practical presentation of Christian experience, profound truths await discovery with each new reading. Every chapter contains gems of hope, comfort or promise that many have committed to memory.

The history of the book itself is quite remarkable. It was the only book that Ellen White initially had printed by a non-Adventist publisher. It also was the only book to which she added an entire chapter after it had already been in circulation. And in later years a report circulated that one of Ellen White's literary assistants, not she herself, had written the manuscripts.

In the summer of 1890 Ellen White was asked to prepare a small book on Christian experience that could be sold for about 50 cents by evangelists and bookstores. Many of her articles that had appeared in the *Review* and *Signs* would be choice material on the subject of salvation.

Ellen White's secretary, Marian Davis, began the work of compiling copy. Some might imagine that Ellen White sat down and wrote *Steps to Christ* chapter by chapter, to communicate the new message of righteousness by faith presented at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference. Not exactly.

Between the summers of 1890 and 1891, Marian Davis searched through all of Ellen White's articles and published volumes, as well as her unpublished letters and manuscripts, looking passages dealing with the Christian life. After these messages were gathered together, Ellen White rewrote some, and added new material to others so as to complete the chapter subjects. Like *The Desire of Ages* and most of her other major works, the final product was an intricately woven compilation gathered from the full range of her writings.

The manuscript was presented to several leading ministers for their reaction at an educational convention held in Harbor Heights, Michigan, in July 1891. Immediately plans were laid for its widest possible sale. One of the ministers present, George B Starr, suggested to Ellen White that the manuscript be offered to religious publisher Fleming H. Revell of Chicago. Starr wanted to get the book into the hands of readers of other denominations.

Ellen White was pleased with the proposal for another reason. It permitted her to be personally responsible for the manuscript, avoiding the customary route of publishing house book committees.²

An Extra Chapter

Six months later, as Ellen White adjusted to her arrival in Australia, she received the news that *Steps to Christ* had been published. According to Starr, it was an instant bestseller,

with seven editions printed in its first year. None of them, however, contained the first chapter found in today's edition. Why was it added after the book had already gone through several printings?

Surprisingly, the extra chapter was initially inserted for a rather mundane reason. Outside the U.S., where Revell had waived publication rights, plans were laid to reprint the book at several of our publishing houses. Later in 1892 the manager of the International Tract Society in London requested that the author contribute some new material to the manuscript so that the book could be properly copyrighted in Great Britain. To meet this request for a new British edition, Ellen White selected a manuscript she had only recently completed. "God's Love for Man" provided a beautiful introduction to the theme of the book, and from that point on, *Steps to Christ* contained 13 chapters.

Those unfamiliar with the book's history have questioned the authorship of that extra chapter. Seventeen years after Ellen White's death, a report began to circulate that Fannie Bolton, one of Ellen White's literary assistants, had actually written the entire book. Such a claim, presented as coming from knowledgeable sources, created no little stir among Adventists in the early 1930s. Fannie Bolton herself could not refute the report, because she had died six years earlier, in 1926.

This assertion was easily disproved by comparing passages from *Steps to Christ* with Ellen White's earlier writings that had been used in compiling the original manuscript—writings published long before Fannie had ever connected with Ellen White.³ Nevertheless, even today this unfounded report is occasionally resurrected and circulated as fact.

The book has been in the public domain for many years, so no one knows how many tens of millions of copies of *Steps to Christ* have been circulated. In recent years, special editions have been printed in quantities of a million at a time. One edition, entitled *Steps to Jesus* (also published as *Knowing Him Better*), retains Ellen White's thoughts but simplifies the language for younger readers. And next year the General Conference Church Ministries Department plans to reprint *Steps to Christ* in a brand-new youth edition. [Published in 1992.]

We don't know who first suggested to Ellen White the idea of a simple book on Christian experience. But one thing is certain: that person had no idea of the millions who would have their first introduction to Christ through that one little volume.

¹ In his 1980 research Roger Coon found Lenin to be the most translated author (222 languages), but it is not known if any one book of his reached that figure.

² By 1908 the copyright for the book was transferred to Ellen White from the Review and Herald, which had purchased the rights from Revell in 1896.

³ For example, compare *Steps to Christ*, page 83, with *Testimonies*, volume 3, pages 246, 247. This part of volume 3 was first published in 1872.

Tim Poirier is archivist at the Ellen G White Estate at the General Conference, Silver Spring, Maryland, USA.