View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Avondale College: ResearchOnline@Avondale

Avondale College

ResearchOnline@Avondale

Education Book Chapters Faculty of Education

12-2019

Beginning of SDA Education in North America

Peter W. Kilgour
Avondale University College, peter.kilgour@avondale.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.avondale.edu.au/edu_chapters

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Kilgour, P. (2019). Beginning of SDA education in North America. In R. McIver, & S. Hattingh (Eds.), *Educating for service and mission: Teachers in Seventh-day Adventist schools in North America and their perceptions of mission* (pp. 49-59). Cooranbong, Australia: Avondale Academic Press.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Education at ResearchOnline@Avondale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@Avondale. For more information, please contact alicia.starr@avondale.edu.au.

4. Beginning of SDA Education in North America

Peter Kilgour

Avondale University College

The beginning of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA or Adventist) education in North America is the beginning of Adventist education worldwide. Many historians have researched and written about the manner in which Adventist schools were established in North America and the way they spread from Battle Creek, Michigan, across the continent and across the world (Knight, 2016; Knight, 1983; Greenleaf, 2005; Cadwallader, 1958). Many of these authors are quoted in this chapter and their combined expertise has been synthesised to provide a picture of these beginnings.

Today there are more than 1,000 Seventh-day Adventist elementary and secondary schools and 13 tertiary institutions in North America (http://adventisteducation.org/est.html). However this chapter is not designed to be about numbers. It is also not about geographical locations or about financial considerations. It is more about the how and the why of Adventist Education. In this chapter I seek to answer questions such as: Why was it started? On what basis did it grow? On what philosophy was it based? How did Adventist education of the era compare to education in general in North America at this time? How does this Adventist education compare to the education that is provided in Adventist schools today? What different personalities and skills drove the pioneers in Adventist Education? From their reflections and diary entries we can build an historical account. There were the visionaries, the intellectuals, the innovators and the passionate workers who gave everything they had for the cause.

Like today, there were also the critics, the cynical, the pseudo-expert church members and administrators who felt qualified to interfere in the education realm.

It is easy to leap to the assumption that Adventist schools were first established so that Adventist doctrines could be infused into the students. It would also be realistic to assume that Adventist children were needing Adventist schools to shroud them in cotton wool away from the sinfulness of public schools. While these two factors appear to have been contributing arguments for starting the Adventist school system, the predominant theme that justified the beginnings of Adventist education in North America will be presented and discussed in this chapter.

Knight (1983) argued that the main reason for establishing Adventist schools put forward by prominent Adventist advisor to Adventist Education, Ellen White, was to provide an education superior to that offered in the public system at the time. Some of the same arguments are held today where textbook-based education is shown to be inferior to a problem-solving and/or critical thinking mode of education (Hattie, 2009). Ellen White was determined that these new Adventist schools would carry a reform agenda. She was determined that the first Adventist schools should have a balanced education that combined biblical knowledge and practical pursuits with textbook knowledge (White, 1923).

This reform agenda recommended by Mrs White was not universally accepted. Many traditional Adventists of the time were wanting to keep the same textbook-based education as the public sector, but to infuse Adventist beliefs into the classroom and have a greater level of discipline. They were not so interested in the radical reforms recommended by Mrs White. Therefore, while schools were gradually being built and developed in North America from 1872, Mrs White did not have the opportunity to implement these "radical ideas" until a new college commenced in Australia in 1897. Here she was able to implement her complete reform agenda because she met less resistance. This college is now known as Avondale University College.

It is interesting to note that while the Seventh-day Adventist denomination was founded on 'present truth', with the exciting prospect

of reform and innovation, the education system itself was one of the last types of institutions within this denomination to be established, built and developed. It would have been very disappointing for Mrs White to witness the educators of the era wishing to promulgate past modes of education rather taking this opportunity to implement progressive reform and an innovative agenda. This would have seemed even more frustrating for her because it had taken so long for the denomination to recognise any need for an education system.

It seems easy for us to look back from our 21st-century viewpoint and say that the mix of useful labour and study is not something we could easily implement today because of industrial implications such as workplace health and minimum wages. For her time, however, the innovations Mrs White recommended for the fledgling Adventist school system were radical. Because she based her philosophy on 'present truth' and moved with the times (Astleford, 2016), she would be the first to accept that the push for integration of technology and employability skills in today's education is essentially exactly what she was talking about. I am proud to be an Adventist educator who has great regard for such advice that is still applicable 150 years later. She also wrote,

> ... we are living in perilous times, and it does not become us to accept everything claimed to be truth without examining it thoroughly; neither can we afford to reject anything that bears the fruits of the Spirit of God, but we should be teachable, meek and lowly of heart" (White, 1992, p. 785).

The future thinking and awareness of new ideas and innovations that Mrs White put forward for the new Adventist schools was reflected in the way she dealt with the church and its theology at the time.

The impact of Ellen White on early Adventist education is profound, not only through the ideas and the inspiration she passed on, but also because of her longevity in the sector. As Knight commented (1983, p. 26), "… she was the only Adventist leader who was in constant prominence from its beginnings up through the end of its formative period (about 1910)". The fact that Mrs White was still providing guidance in the 1890s explains why her book, *Education*, published in 1903, has a much more Christ-centered focus than, for example, *Proper Education* that she published in 1872. The events of the General Conference Session of 1888 had caused the church

at large and Mrs White in particular to want to make the education system more Christ-focussed.

The first school with an Adventist flavor that commenced operation in North America was established by early believers 10 years before the denomination was organized in 1863. In this sense it cannot be called a Seventh-day Adventist school, but the families who lived in Buck's Bridge in New York State started the school out of a passion to provide something better for their children. While the school only lasted three years, it was during this time that a young Ellen White wrote several articles advising parents to take the behavior of their children seriously and teach them in the home (Greenleaf, 2005). Her husband, James White, read an article in the Michigan Journal of Education that condemned the public-school system for its negligence in regard to the behavior and language of its students. He was convinced that families and/or groups of families should be prepared to pay teachers to teach their children in a more wholesome and Adventist-oriented manner. He went on to advocate for the opening of small church schools (Greenleaf, 2005).

The contribution made by James White to the establishment of Adventist schools and indeed to the whole church was significant. His wife, Ellen, provided the inspiration, but James was a man of action who saw that the work of education and the work of the church had limitless boundaries and he tirelessly worked himself to an early death at the age of 60. It was not helpful that James had health issues for most of his life but he was a multi-talented and driven person. He was passionate about education, a leader who people wanted to follow, an effective communicator, a good financial planner and had a proven record as an author and editor (Graham, 1983). He wrote, "I charge that it is almost impossible for a young man whose mind never has been disciplined to study, who has not had educational advantages, to become a thorough Bible student and able minister" (White, 1873, p. 180). James White, regularly voiced his passion to have young people in the early church educated appropriately.

One needs to remember that in this era the USA was dealing with many issues as a country that brought about confusion in the education sector (Bettman, 1974). Kilgour and Christian (2017) commented: "to put things in perspective, the era being discussed

includes the California gold rush, the civil war, abolition of slavery, and the invention of dynamite, the light globe and basketball" (p. 12). In many ways the country was in a rebuilding phase, in a state of flux. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was formed amid all this and was itself uncertain as to whether indulging in an extensive education system was a useful thing to do when the second coming of Jesus was believed to be imminent.

To put Ellen White's philosophy of educating the whole person into perspective, in many ways it came at the right time in America's history, but also at the wrong time. For many years colleges were not seen as institutions that prepared students for careers and professions, but were there for academic endeavors such as teaching the classics and languages. In the latter half of the 19th century Americans were starting to realise that putting their country back together after the Civil War was going to be a long-term project. It would have to grow and develop in practical ways. During this time college degrees that included science and other forms of technical learning that were considered as professional or vocational began to be accepted as legitimate and necessary college qualifications.

Prominent pioneers in the history of the denomination made comment about the necessity of an Adventist education system. J.N. Andrews, who became the first church worker sent overseas, said:

> It is very evident that such a place of instruction is greatly needed. It is not enough that those who offer themselves to become labourers in the work of ministry should be made of piety. This is indispensable, but it is also necessary that those who teach others should have knowledge to impart. (Andrews, 1873, p. 124)

The president of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (the established headquarters of the church) at the time, G.I. Butler, when talking about the establishment of Battle Creek College, stated:

> It is shown that the next great necessity among us is the school, in order that we may do the work ready for our hands. We cannot accomplish that work unless we have proper buildings in which to teach, lecture, and instruct those who have something to do in the cause as well as our children and we wish to have kept from the influences prevailing largely among the secular schools of the present time. (Butler, 1873, p. 148)

The idea of a more practical and useful education that educates 'head, heart, and hand' (White, 1872), while seen as radical when Mrs White put forward the concept, had been tried earlier in that century before Seventh-day Adventists arrived on the scene. Greenleaf (2005) tells the story of Oberlin College in Ohio. In 1833 Oberlin was restructured to become coeducational. They "threw out 'pagan' classics in favor of biblically based instruction as the foundation of a college education, introduced manual labour as part of the curriculum, and taught dietary reform" (Greenleaf, 2005, p. 23). This philosophy and application was not widely accepted and in Oberlin College it was toned down in the later part of the 19th century just when the USA was rebuilding its social structure and education base, and when Mrs White was advocating similar philosophies for the network of Adventist schools that was beginning to develop. Goodloe Harper Bell, who had been a teacher at Oberlin College, became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1867 and so was already won over to the idea of a more practical and work-based education when he became the first teacher employed by the church system to teach in its first school at Battle Creek, Michigan (Lindsay, 1982).

Though the church was officially organized in this location in 1863, the college itself was not officially opened until 1874. While it is true that there had been earlier schools established, these were privately financed and not affiliated directly to the church as an institution. These schools indicated that the church members of that time perceived a need for Adventist education.

Goodloe Harper Bell was a perfectionist in everything he did. He was determined to do the very best he could but got annoyed at his humanity and was determined to cooperate as much as possible with his God. This was a recipe destined for great things and was certainly needed in the early and turbulent years of Adventist education and of American society and culture in general. Bell has to be mentioned in the history of Adventist schools in North America because he represents teachers of all ages who are very good at what they do to the extent that they can become perfectionistic and expect their students to be the same. He passionately believed, however, in the counsel of Mrs White and was totally committed to Adventist education. Unfortunately, Bell was determined to follow his path of discipline with the students to the extent that he came into conflict with Alexander McLearn, who

in 1881 was appointed as the new president of Battle Creek College. This continuing conflict caused Bell to leave Battle Creek College and move to South Lancaster to start a new Adventist school. This was a great loss to Battle Creek College but it again showed his commitment to education. Mrs White recognised the skills of Bell and the time, effort and passion he put into his teaching, but he ended up leaving Adventist schools at the end of 1883 after also having issues at this new school (Lindsay, 1982).

It is on record that the first decade of operation for Battle Creek College was a difficult time for all involved, to the extent that it was actually closed as a functioning educational institution for 12 months though the 1882–1883 term. Historical documents provide only one side to the reasons for this closure. George Butler, the then General Conference President, in an article published in the church's journal, Review and Herald, revealed that over the decade of its operation Battle Creek College had gradually become more secular and had departed from its original purpose (Butler, 1883). When it reopened, it was under the leadership of Wolcott H. Littlejohn, who, even though he suffered with poor eyesight, spent two years building the College, putting special emphasis on denominational service. Not only was Littlejohn successful in sending out a large number of denominational workers at the end of 1884, he was also successful in uniting the church membership of Battle Creek in its support for the college. Unfortunately he was not able to expand the work program of the college to the extent advocated by Mrs White.

In 1885 W.W. Prescott assumed leadership of Battle Creek College. He took the school to new levels of success, not only in the teaching of biblical truths and in the preparation of denominational workers, but also in raising academic standards. Prescott was still president in 1888 when at the General Conference Session in Minneapolis a new emphasis on righteousness by faith was introduced to Adventism. Soon after this revelation, Prescott held a conference at Battle Creek College where he initiated the writing of new curriculum for biblical studies based on this new truth and soon after four-year degrees were instituted. Four other major Adventist educational institutions were opened during this period. Prescott had indeed become a strong and influential leader (Vande Vere, 1983).

After becoming the president of Battle Creek College at the age of 29, Prescott proceeded to add quality to the institution to the extent that enrollments grew significantly under his administration. He called the dormitories 'College Homes' and introduced dignity into the way students conducted themselves. He attempted to implement industries on campus and in the face of teaching staff who were still entrenched in classical forms of education, attempted to make classes more Christian-focused.

In 1887 the General Conference created the new position of the Secretary of Education. Prescott was appointed to this position while simultaneously serving as the president of Battle Creek College. Prescott was instrumental in the establishment of Union College in 1891; Walla Walla College in 1892; Graysville Academy in 1892; Keene Industrial School in 1894 and Oakwood Industrial School in 1896. All of this was done while overseeing Battle Creek College from 1885; Healdsburg College in 1882; and South Lancaster Academy in 1882. He also contributed to the start of Avondale School in Australia; Claremont School in South Africa and Duncombe Hall Missionary College in England (Vande Vere, 1983).

At first interested, but then a little apathetic towards the call to a greater recognition of the righteousness of Christ at the 1888 General Conference Session in Minneapolis, Prescott gradually became more convinced than ever that Adventist schools needed spiritual renewal. At a special Institute for the denomination in 1891 this new direction being put forward by Prescott was followed by many more. With regard to these meetings Vande Vere (1983, p. 123) states:

> Much was said about teachers being kind, tender-hearted, forgiving, godly, and wise – wise to lay aside the drudgery and cleverness of the classics for the study of the Bible, prophecy, and history. More than a few dedicated themselves to reform.

At last a unique vision of what Adventist education could be was forming.

W.W. Prescott must be remembered as being absolutely influential in the history of Adventist Education, but also in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Not only was his imprint visible on several early Adventist colleges, he was the first leader in education at the General Conference, had input into the denomination's structure, and

even had an active part in the worldwide publishing work of the church. According to Valentine (2005), Prescott was “the denomination’s most highly educated and articulate educational administrator during the formative period of Adventist education” (p. 13).

There were many more significant physical events in the history of Adventist education in North America, but rather I conclude this chapter by returning to the feelings and philosophies that pervaded its early history.

White’s philosophy of Adventist education developed over several decades. She did not contradict her earlier writings and eventually in 1903 produced her seminal work, *Education*, which became the book of choice for a textbook in education courses. It is widely used in the Adventist education arena to spell out the specific and niche aims and objectives of Adventist schools.

Mrs White was determined that Adventist schools would not be reformed public schools but would be developed with a specific philosophy. This philosophy remained basically the same from the inception of the first Adventist school through the rest of her life. It took a slight redirection in 1888 when the gospel of salvation and the righteousness of Christ received a new emphasis in the denomination. This brought about a renewed emphasis on the primacy of the redemptive role of Adventist schools. As pointed out by Knight (2016), “the redemptive aim of Christian education is what makes it Christian. The primary function of Christian education is to lead young people into a transforming, saving relationship with Jesus Christ” (p. 132).

In the words of White (1903):

> In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one, for in education, as in redemption, “other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” “It was the good pleasure of the father that in him should all the fullness dwell.” 1 Corinthians 3:11; Colossians 1:19, R.V. (p. 28)

Ellen White and James White realised that other objectives such as “academic achievement, character development, the formation of a Christian mind, and education for social responsibility and the world of work, must take second place” (Knight, 2016, p. 132). Such was the determination of Adventist education pioneers.

References

Andrews, J. N. (1873, January). *Review and Herald*. 41(16), 124.

Astleford, J. (2016). Expanding our idea of present truth. *Ministry*. 2016(2), p. 14–16. Retrieved from https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2016/02/expanding-our-understanding-of-present-truth

Bettmann, O. (1974). *The good old days — they were terrible!* New York, NY: Random House.

Butler, G. I. (1873, April). *Review and Herald*, 41(19), 148.

Butler, G. I. (1883). Our college at Battle Creek. *Review and Herald*, 60(31), 489–490.

Cadwallader, E. M. (1958). A history of Seventh-day Adventist education. Payson, AZ: Leaves-of-Autumn Books.

Graham, R. E. (1983). James White: initiator. In G.R. Knight (Ed.), *Early Adventist educators* (p. 11-26). Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.

Greenleaf, F. (2005). *In passion for the world*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London, UK: Routledge.

Kilgour, P. W. & Christian, B. J. (2017). Old school or cutting edge? An examination of Ellen G. White's views on education from a best practice twenty-first century perspective. *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*, 11(2), Article 7.

Knight, G. R. (1983). Early Adventists and education: attitudes and context. In G.R. Knight (ed.), *Early Adventist educators* (p. 1–11). Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.

Knight, G. R. (2016). *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education*. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.

Lindsay, A. G., "Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (1982). Dissertations. 523.

https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/523

Valentine, G. M. (2005). *W. W. Prescott: forgotten giant of Adventism's second generation*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publ. Assoc.

Vande Vere, E. K. (1983). William Warren Prescott: administrator. In G.R. Knight (ed.), *Early Adventist Educators* (p. 115-136). Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.

White, E. G. (1872). Proper education. *Health Reformer*, 28.

White, E. G. (1892, December). *Review and Herald*. 69(50), 785–786.

White, E. G. (1903). *Education*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publ. Assoc.

White, E. G. (1923). *Fundamentals of Christian Education*. Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association.

White, J. (1873, May). *Review and Herald*. 41(23), 180.