Ellen G. White and Female Prophetic Authority in the Adventist Tradition in Australia

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Ellen Gould White (1827-1915), the prophet and joint founder of the Seventh-day Adventist church, was one of the most significant women and religious leaders of her age. This paper explores the sources of White’s prophetic authority through an examination of her activity in Australia where she lived from 1891 – 1900. It will be argued that White drew strength from the long tradition of female prophecy within radical, millennialist Protestantism which remained an active part of the religious mainstream in the United States until the mid nineteenth-century. White chose Australia to be the location of a missionary operation in order to secure the continued expansion of the Seventh-day Adventist church and to seek the fulfilment of her own prophetic vision. Although less successful than she might have wished, White’s Australian mission was probably the most ambitious adventure of her life and merits closer scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION: ELLEN G. WHITE AND SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM

Ellen Gould White (1827-1915), the American prophet and joint founder of the world-wide Seventh-day Adventist church, was one of the most significant religious leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On her death in 1915, after a lifetime of preaching, writing and travel, White left a legacy of twenty-five million published and unpublished words, and a church which would grow to hold more than 9,500,000 members by the late twentieth century (Encyclopedia Brittanica 2000). It is not generally known that White is also a significant figure in Australia’s religious history, though her achievements in Australia, where she lived from 1891 to 1900, are on a more modest scale. The contemporary Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia is a stable denomination, having risen from the 3,379 affiliates counted in the 1901 census held shortly after White’s departure, to some 48,000 members in 1991 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, cited by Carey 1996, 209). However, it does not rival any of the major Protestant denominations from whom it has traditionally held itself aloof.

Reflecting their low community profile, most Australians know little about

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the Seventh-day Adventists though they may associate them with Sanitarium health-food products, such as Weetbix, religious vegetarianism, and their popular hospital in Wahroonga in Sydney’s northern suburbs (Gill 1982). Residents of the Central Coast region of New South Wales will also be familiar with the Seventh-day Adventist complex consisting of factory, farm, school, Avondale College and village at Cooranbong, not far from the Ourimbah campus of the University of Newcastle where the conference which gave rise to this issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* was held. In more recent times, the image of Seventh-day Adventism has been overshadowed by the tragic events and subsequent witchhunt that surrounded the death of Azaria Chamberlain (Piggin 1990). The subsequent trial, imprisonment and pardoning of Lindy Chamberlain for the murder of her baby was a testing time for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, of which she was a member, and all small religious groups in Australia. Bryson and Piggin report that Adventist congregations were disturbed at the height of the controversy by graffiti daubed on their churches, accusations of bizarre sacrificial practices and even comparison with the Jonestown massacres (Piggin 1990; Bryson 1985). Even sympathetic coverage, such as that of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, tended to mark the Adventists out as, somehow, rather odd (Bentley 1992). The death of a number of Australian Adventist converts to David Koresh’s Branch Davidians in the fiery apotheosis of Waco have served recently to re-awaken these perceptions.

Lindy Chamberlain’s stoic and religious endurance throughout her ordeal had a compelling quality which made her a media favourite and, as Piggin argues, may have contributed to her persecution (Piggin 1990). Her faith was an anachronism in a secular age. But it should be noted that by affirming her faith, Lindy Chamberlain was maintaining a link to the history of female advocacy and prophecy that can be seen exemplified in the life of Ellen White.

It is this tradition of female prophecy which forms the starting point for this article which seeks to explore the ways in which Ellen G. White maintained her authority and built her church in the context of her Australian mission experiment. Australian Adventists have been active in pursuing their own history, and some excellent bibliographical and other studies have been written by Arthur Patrick (Patrick 1984, 1986, 1987, 1991), as well as the collections of articles edited by Ferch and Clapham (Clapham 1985; Ferch 1986). However, this article is the first historical analysis of Ellen G. White in Australia to be published by a non-Adventist scholar. Because of the relative obscurity of the denomination, it begins with an account of the rise of the movement in the United States and its later transplantation to Australia. It also considers the nature of the relationship between Adventism and Evangelical Protestantism which has been a key issue for contemporary Australian Adventists.

The Seventh-day Adventists were the largest of the churches established in the wake of the bitter disappointment which followed the failure, in 1843 and
1844, of the predictions of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ by the former Baptist farmer and preacher, William Miller (1782–1849). Aided by an active press campaign, both hostile and sympathetic to the predictions, it is estimated by Barkun that up to a million people may have become convinced that Christ was to return to farmland in upstate New York (Barkun 1986). Such religious movements seem incredible in the Australian context, which has no comparable history of large-scale popular religious excitement. But millennial movements and rhetoric have long been appreciated as an essential part of the American religious and national experience and the history of both Millerism and its successors have been extensively studied (Tuveson 1968; Butler 1974; Gaustad 1974; Numbers and Butler 1987). Barkun in particular has traced the rise and fall of Millerism in the evocatively named “burned-over district” of upstate New York (Barkun 1986).

Ellen G. White, the prophet who emerged from the shattered hopes of 1843 and 1844, has also attracted historical attention. Ron Numbers, an esteemed historian of science who was raised in the Seventh-day Adventist church, has written an acclaimed biography of her (Numbers 1992). In the decade after 1844, Adventists squabbled over a range of issues and the movement never recovered the numbers who gathered at the high water mark of Millerite enthusiasm. Numbers has pointed to the charismatic leadership of Ellen Gould White as the source for the re-birth of hope after the Second Great Disappointment of 1844 and the establishment of a new millennial program for the Seventh-day Adventist movement which followed. Without White, the church would not have been established.

In Bible study meetings, the main focus of worship in Adventist communities, White gradually came to establish herself as the most authoritative voice directing reading and interpretation. In the context of these meetings, and before developing her teaching on health, White came to prominence by developing and sustaining an original exegesis of a key text in the Book of Daniel, which provided an explanation for the apparent failure of Miller’s prophecies. On her reading of Daniel 8–9, White explained that Miller had not been wrong in his calculation of the Second Coming, but that God had chosen this time to begin the “cleansing of the sanctuary”, which was a stage preliminary to the actual appearance of Christ (Gaustad 1974). As early as 1844, White claims to have endorsed her new view on the “cleansing of the sanctuary” asserting: “The Lord shew me in a vision . . . that Brother Crosier had the true light . . . I feel fully authorised by the Lord to recommend his Theory to every saint” (White 1915., 12). White’s “sanctuary teaching” was to continue to cause controversy, even in Australia, but White slowly established her authority and quashed opposition. Under White’s leadership, post-Millerite Adventists continued to anticipate an imminent second coming, but developed a number of practices which set them apart from other Protestant denominations. Most distinctively, these included the observation of Saturday as the Sabbath and the preservation of the body as the Temple of the Lord.
through a health regime which included personal hygiene, vegetarianism and temperance (Numbers and Butler 1987).

In Australia, a key issue for Adventists has been the nature of the relationship between Seventh-day Adventism and Evangelical Protestantism, the most successful form of non-Catholic Christianity. Australian Adventists may well find it more comfortable to align themselves with Evangelicals because there has been very little appreciation of religious millennialism in the Australian context. Indeed, Breward has commented that this is one way in which Australian religious culture can be distinguished from that of the United States (Breward 1993, 9). On the basis of White’s Australian work, Patrick has argued that White can best be understood as an Evangelical (Patrick 1991). There are, however, a number of reasons to challenge this hypothesis.

Adventists can be distinguished from Evangelicals in important ways. For Millerite Adventists, the key distinction lies in the Adventist embrace of what Butler labels apolitical apocalyptic which burned in anticipation of the premillennial coming of Christ and the 1000-year reign which his Advent would initiate (Butler 1974, 173). Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Evangelicals cooled in their attitude to the Second Coming and turned from premillennial ardour to postmillennial holiness. As in the United States, one effect of this transformation in Evangelicalism in Australia was a more active engagement with programs of moral and social reform, building the Kingdom here on earth in anticipation of Christ’s return (Lawton 1990). It also led to the founding of new churches, including the Salvation Army (Humphreys and Ward 1988, 128–33).

At a more mundane level, although it is important not to underestimate the radicalism represented by Saturday worship — let alone vegetarianism — to mainstream Christians, the Seventh-day Adventists have remained close to other ardent Evangelicals in their reliance on the Bible, their disdain for complex ritual and their enthusiasm for mission. Even the central place allocated to the prophecy of Ellen G. White can be paralleled in the practices of other Protestants, including Methodists and Baptists, who rely on the charisma of individual leaders to direct Bible study and preaching, and who use the revival meeting as a vehicle for worship, mission and proselytism. Nevertheless, the distance between Adventist and Evangelical Christianity remains. This is demonstrated in the chapter layout of the two major guides to Australian religions in which Adventism and Evangelicalism are clearly distinguished (Gillman 1988; Humphreys and Ward 1988). It is also significant that the Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography does not include accounts of any Seventh-day Adventists, including Ellen G. White (Dickey 1994). The Adventists are also omitted from Piggin’s survey history of Evangelicalism in Australia (Piggin 1996).

Another important way in which Adventists have tended to remain distinct from Evangelical Protestantism is in their acceptance of women as prophetic leaders. This is not to say that the various Adventist movements have ever been
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openly feminist, though, according to Patrick, White did favour female ministry and egalitarianism in the work place, including equal pay (Patrick 1986, 24–25). In current debates, Australian Adventists have been even-handed in their assessment of the capacity for ministry of women candidates (Riven and Gordon 1985). Historically too, Adventists were conservative on some matters relating to the rights of women in the broader community. As reviewed by Patrick, Adventists naturally felt some sympathy for the aims of their “fellow travelers” in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. White was happy to speak to temperance meetings, but was less supportive of the broader WCTU agenda that included political activism in favour of women’s suffrage. She was also unhappy about any social interaction, even for the temperance cause, with Roman Catholics (Patrick 1984; Patrick 1986). However, the stress on individual gifts of ministry which is characteristic of the Adventists has meant that they have been open to women leaders, if they have demonstrated their capacities.

Evangelicals have also had difficulty accepting the authority of Ellen G. White. Suspicion of White and her ever-expanding body of teaching led to considerable suspicion of Adventists by other Protestants (Patrick 1991). Even in more recent times in Australia, doubts about White gave rise to the doctrinal controversy initiated in the early 1980s by Dr Desmond Ford, an Australian who was once head of the Religious Department at the Adventists’ Avondale College (Gill 1982). In this article I am seeking to stress White’s historical significance to the church, and her role as prophet to an emerging church. I also wish to stress the intellectual and theological distinctiveness of the Adventist as opposed to the Evangelical Protestant traditions. On both these matters, modern Seventh-day Adventism are seeking to bring about change – but that is not the concern of an historian.

The early history of Adventism in Australia can be briefly told (Ward and Humphreys 1995). Australian Adventists were established in Melbourne by pastors sent out from the United States in 1885 and grew slowly from centres in Sydney and Melbourne in the period before World War I (Krause 1986). Details about White can be gleaned from the Australian Dictionary of Biography entry prepared by Gary Krauze, but the most extensive account of White’s Australian years was compiled by her grandson, Arthur L. White (Krauze 1966–; White 1983). Prolixity would seem to run in the family, although he cannot approach White’s literary output, Arthur White’s Australian volume is just one in his six-tome biography. In addition, there are full records relating to White’s Australian sojourn in White’s own autobiographical Life Sketches (White 1915). There are also news reports in Australian Adventist papers such as The Bible Echo and Signs of the Times, published in Melbourne, and The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, published in Michigan. Over and above all this, there are typescript copies of White’s enormous correspondence held in the EGW/SDA Research Centre. The originals are held by the Ellen G. White Estate Inc. at Silver Spring, USA. Australian Adventist historians are
also indebted to the full and careful account of the archival records of her Australian stay prepared by Arthur N. Patrick, referred to earlier (Patrick 1987).

From these lovingly prepared sources, it is clear that White’s Australian work was not a retirement project for her declining years but was originally imagined as the culmination of a prophetic journey. Butler points out that a key development for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, organized under a General Conference in May 1863, was an identification of American Protestantism with the second beast of the Apocalypse (Butler 1974). This was a powerful reflection of the despair felt by Adventists with their own times and nation, convulsed as it was by the Civil War (1861–65). One consequence of this turning away from the United States was the sudden expansion by Adventists, outlined by Butler, into mission enterprises. Although White came to mitigate her earlier identification of the Satanic character of America, she appears to have moved away irrevocably from the mainstream Christian characterisation of the United States as a redeemer nation. Instead she chose to develop the temperance, health and hygiene projects which ultimately represented a new set of millennial goals for her followers (Butler 1974, 197). In addition, she was personally drawn to the mission field, including Australia.

PROPHETIC WOMEN

Ellen Gould White was a prophet, that is, someone who was acknowledged to be a vessel for God’s word. A prophet in this context is not, as is popularly understood, someone who can predict the future. Rather, a prophet is someone who takes up the role played by Old Testament prophets such as Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or the apocalypticists, Daniel and, from the last book of the New Testament, John of Patmos. In this strict sense, Ellen White was much more a prophet than the man whose disappointed predictions of the Second Coming she sought to assuage. William Miller was a preacher who calculated when Christ might return. In a strenuous life, Ellen White made known God’s plans to her people, a far more challenging proposition. In place of the Second Coming, she gave them an ideal of perfect physical and spiritual health; in place of disappointment she gave them hope, inspiring them to build schools, hospitals and training colleges from where they could be sent out as missionaries to places as far away as Australia; where there were doubters, she silenced them. In short, she built a church, moulding the faith of her followers in her prophetic powers to sustain them in the enterprise.

As a woman, White’s achievement was paradoxical although she could draw on some historical precedents. In her own words, she claimed that during Bible study meetings, her role was only to assist when no-one else was able to make a contribution:

[W]hen they came to the point in their study where they said “we can do nothing more” [it was then that] the spirit of the Lord would come upon me and I would be taken off in vision and a clear explanation of
the passages we had been studying would be given to me (White 1958, 1: 206–7).4 While this capacity to capture an audience with the force of her interpretation was the base for White’s original authority, it should be noted that she went on to build her leadership on a much broader base of accomplishment.

White’s chosen role as an interpreter of Scripture – as a prophet – continues a well-established tradition. While women in medieval Europe also worked actively as prophets – one thinks immediately of Hildegard of Bingen, or Catherine of Siena – the specific role taken by White belongs clearly to that of radical, particularly millennial, Protestantism. For the seventeenth century, the significance of women leaders of ecstatic and prophetic traditions has been argued with great flair by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Phyllis Mack, focussing especially on the demonstrations of quaker women (Mack 1982; Mack 1992; Ruether 1990). Perhaps the most remarkable of these women civil war prophets was Lady Eleanor Davies, who came to identify herself as the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12:1–6).5 In 1636, according to Diane Watt, Davies “entered Lichfield Cathedral, sat on the Bishop’s throne and declared that she was Primate and Metropolitan”, and then, pouring tar over the altar, told worshippers “that she had sprinkled holy water upon the same against their Communion there next” (Watt 1997). To assert God’s authority a woman might be authorised to do anything.

The tradition does not die out. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, as Taylor and Harrison have shown, female prophecy continued to be used as a vehicle for radical religious and social protest (Taylor 1983; Harrison 1979). The most famous of the female prophets of the industrialising age are two Englishwomen, both of whom share some features with Ellen White. They are Ann Lee (1736–1784), the inspired leader and reformer of the English and then the American Shakers, and Joanna Southcott (1750–1814).

Like Eleanor Davies, Ann Lee and Joanna Southcott came to identify themselves with the woman clothed with the sun who was to save the whole world through bearing the Saviour. Joanna Southcott, originally a farm girl from Devon who was converted to Methodism in 1792, began receiving visions not long afterwards (Hopkins 1982). She gathered followers and preached the coming of the Kingdom. In 1814, she was informed by the Spirit: “This year, in the sixty-fifth year of thy age, thou shalt have a Son, by the power of the Most High”. For Southcott, “Woman brought to Man the GOOD fruit at the first, / And from the Woman shall the good Fruit burst” (Southcott 1802, cited by Taylor, 1983). Tragically for both the prophetess and her followers, the expected birth did not arise and Joanna died the same year. Despite this setback, Southcott’s work was then taken up by her followers, who shared a strong missionary spirit that brought them eventually to the Australian colonies.

Joanna’s prophecies and teaching were disseminated in Australia by John Wroe, who made a series of visits to the colonies between 1843 and his death in Melbourne in 1863 (Ward and Humphreys 1995). During his visits, Wroe
established branches of the Christian Israelites in Sydney, Melbourne, Geelong, Hobart and Adelaide. His followers in Australia were mostly of very humble origins and included ex-convicts (Atkinson 1985). Women were particularly active in the early days of the sect, and the reports of his speeches and sermons while visiting Australia reveal a considerable concern with issues of sexual behaviour and religious prophecy. These have been edited by Alan Atkinson and are the source for what follows.

While Wroe was visiting Penrith in Sydney in 1843, Harriet Hoe, one of the community, was “affected in a strange manner”. After the usual meeting, she stripped off her clothes, ran through a field and then came to the house where all were assembled. She began to dance and was eventually presented to Wroe who performed a successful exorcism. After she had put her clothes back on she is reported as saying to the prophet, “I am the first Eve, thou shut me out, the Bible is my guide, and thou art the man”. Harriet Hoe had been convicted at Portsmouth in 1818 and transported. Her conversation with Wroe, and her insistence on her authority as a woman, the first Eve, to interpret the Bible against any man, recalls similar threads in the other English millennial cults reported by Harrison and Taylor (Harrison 1979; Taylor 1983). In the Australian case, the seeds for this kind of sectarian radicalism fell on relatively dry ground. The Christian Israelites are still active in New Zealand and, in some centres in Australia, including the Central Coast, but the urgent message of the first communities does not seem to have had the wide appeal of their English counterparts. Ann Lee, the reformer of the Shakers, also felt driven to missionary work. In her case, the mission was to America.

Both Southcott and Lee, and women prophets before them, had to assert their authority despite their sex. But there was a mechanism by which female power could be established. Ann Lee never maintained that she was the equal of Christ, but rather, in the immediate absence of the Messiah (though he may return at any time), she would have to do (Brewer 1986; Brewer 1992). Her followers however came to regard Mother Lee as the female complement to Christ. This appears to have been strongly attractive to women. According to Brewer, within the Shaker community women soon came to outnumber men and steps were taken to limit the remarkable autonomy which women enjoyed – as prophets – within the movement.

It would be unusual if Ellen White had not known of the activities, and possibly the writing of Mother Ann Lee. But it is equally possible that she built her own power base independently out of the same potentially transformative ingredients: the Bible, an absolute acceptance of the power of God to enlighten the hearts of men and women, and a certain spunk or, to be less anachronistic, a creative spirit of abandonment to the will of God, guided by Scripture. What is certain is that White chose to exercise her prophecy, like the Southcottians and Lee, by taking on a missionary journey – this time to Australia.

In Australia, the prophetic role adopted by White has some parallels in the work of women in a number of other smaller Christian and esoteric faiths (Roe...
Australian women responded sympathetically to the call for followers by a number of other female sectarian leaders, including Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, and, within Theosophy, Madame Blavatsky. Jill Roe has made some tentative suggestions concerning the appeal of “alternative” religious traditions to the Colonial intelligentsia in the pre-war period and the mysterious attraction of Christian Science in particular to a significant number of Australian feminists (Roe 1998). Holton has argued that “Science” (with a capital “S”) provided a vehicle to build an identity beyond illness in the case of the British women’s historian Alice Clark (Holton 1999). Conversion to radical religion was, for such women, an act of feminist self-empowerment. For Ellen White, whose health was also frail, the call of God was heard simultaneously with the call to better health.

The overall pattern by which women seem to have found opportunities for leadership and fulfilment within sectarian religion is now well recognised. It is more challenging to provide a full explanation for the appeal which these religions, which were often far from supportive of women’s leadership ambitions, had for women. Ellen White benefited from a certain flexibility that existed within the emerging Adventist tradition, which had yet to establish formalised hierarchies which excluded female authority. In some more contemporary new religious movements, the apocalyptic mode which was adopted by White has itself been feminised (Palmer 1997). As in Seventh-day Adventism and Christian Science, women have emerged as prophetic healers of the world, spiritually and physically, a role which builds on traditional stereotypes of female caring. White’s personal mode of leadership, however, stemmed more from millennial tradition than from the New Thought currents such as Spiritualism, temperance and the Alcoholics Anonymous movement which, as Satter has shown, was attractive to a significant number of fin de siècle women leaders (Satter 1999). Similarly, an understanding of the very real attractions of Theosophy, which was able to snare so distinguished a feminist leader as Annie Besant, is not really useful in explaining White (Bevir 1999). In the end White needs to be appreciated as a complex and resourceful leader who simply dismissed the traditional and practical constraints imposed by her sex, health, relative lack of education and other factors which might have reduced her effectiveness in attaining her chosen goals. This determination is strikingly demonstrated by her decision to personally supervise the Australian mission.

ELLEN WHITE IN AUSTRALIA, 1891–1900

The period from 1891 to 1900 which White spent in Australia and New Zealand was characterised by a program of incessant activity, travelling, writing and planning which were only occasionally interrupted by severe rheumatism. Ellen White celebrated her sixty-fourth birthday on the voyage
from San Francisco to Sydney on which she was accompanied by her son, William, and a staff of four women. In Australia, she was based initially in Melbourne, but moved to Sydney where she stayed until 1895 before finally settling at Cooranbong, an isolated farming area on the central coast of New South Wales (Krauze 1966–).

White left the United States after accepting, with some hesitation, the invitation of the Foreign Mission Board of the General Conference at Battle Creek to go to Australia. One source of her reluctance was the ongoing controversy about her “sanctuary” teaching, which had caused objections to their work on other foreign mission fields. She pondered:

I am considering, Can it be my duty to go to Australia? Shall I not meet the same objections in the sanctuary line in Australia that I met in Switzerland? What can I do? I am presenting the case before the Lord and I believe He will guide me (White 1983, 18).

The Lord eventually showed White the light, but it is harder for us to understand why she decided to come to Australia. It may be supposed that White had hopes that her Australian mission, under her personal supervision, might be able to provide the spiritual and material means to extend her life’s work beyond the boundaries of the United States. In order to maintain her authority over the church world-wide, she insisted on a high level of contact and compliance with her by her ministers. Using her prophetic status to sustain her injunctions, she insisted on the absolute silencing of dissenters from her views; a strict adherence to the health and dietary regime; and a practical program of fund-raising and building to support the objectives of the movement. This program was held together by her endless correspondence to individuals, and their reading of her books. As she grew older, the spreading of the Adventist word on an ever-expanding mission field was an increasingly important goal for her. A brochure she wrote in Melbourne in 1898 begins:

There is a burden upon my soul in regard to the destitute mission fields. There is aggressive work to be done in the missions near you; there is a great need of funds to advance the work in foreign fields. Our foreign missions are languishing. The missionaries are not sustained as God requires they should be (White 1898).

The need was so urgent that church members should cast off all their desire for earthly treasure, remembering that, “we are travelers, pilgrims and strangers on earth”. Children should not be encouraged to expect birthday presents but should work to employ their talents in the Lord’s service. True to these sentiments, she had chosen to go on mission herself, despite the risk of losing touch with the main community in the United States.

One secret to White’s success as a religious leader was her seemingly limitless capacity for communication with her flock, which was unimpeded by her distance from them. During her years in Australia, in addition to innumerable letters, White published four books: *Steps to Christ* (1892), *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (1896); *The Desire of Ages* (1898)
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Christ’s Object Lessons (1900) and a number of other volumes (Krauze 1966– ). The Desire of Ages, in many ways White’s major work, was an account of the life of Christ that ran to 863 pages. The key to White’s remarkable output were the four women who accompanied her from the United States who acted as a team of amanuenses capturing every thought of the prophet as it was uttered. Ellen White declared one of her secretaries, Marian Davis, “my bookmaker” (letter quoted by Patrick 1991):

She takes my articles which are published in the papers, and pastes them in blank books. She also has a copy of all the letters I write. In preparing a chapter for a book, Marian remembers that I have written something on that special point, which may make the matter more forcible. She begins to search for this, and if when she finds it, she sees that it will make the chapter more clear, she adds it. The books are not Marian’s productions, but my own, gathered from all my writings. Marian has a large field from which to draw, and her ability to arrange the matter is of great value to me. It saves my poring over a mass of matter, which I have not time to do (White Letters, Letter 61a, 1900).

The extent of borrowing from other writers which White engaged in is something which Adventist historians have trouble acknowledging. While pointing out the resemblance of passages of White’s Life of Christ to the work of William Hanna, Cunningham Geikie and others, her biographer only admits that “The finished product gives evidence . . . that they made some use of Hanna’s book. While there are no paragraphs or, to our knowledge, even complete sentences taken from it, there are phrases here and there that can be easily identified” (White 1983, 378). Such action should be absolved because White was a prophet, divinely inspired, and her “reading was primarily an aid in presenting precious truths through her pen”.

The books were probably of less importance to her most intimate followers than White’s personal letters. Reviewing her correspondence, it is characteristic of White’s style to rebuke friends and associates in the most intimate terms for their moral failings. If they did not reply, she would charge them with ignoring her. She advised wives to support and obey their husbands, always dreading the influence wives could have over new converts to the faith (White 1983).

White also stayed in touch with her original supporters. In 1894, a letter addressed to White arrived from Joshua V. Hines, the publicist who masterminded the media campaign which shot William Miller to national attention in the 1840s (Barkun 1986). Hines was then 89 years old and a patient in the Battle Creek Sanatorium. He had heard of White’s work and sent her a small donation towards its continuance. Hines had been closely involved with William Miller in the Great Second Advent Awakening of the 1840s, the “second disappointment”. Now, he wrote, he saw White as continuing a work he could not longer attend to:

I preach the Advent as being near, without a definite time, and I
believe it. I do not look far into the future of the present dispensation. You and your associates have done a great work since 1844, and still go on... Well, I finished my work really in 1844, with Father Miller. After that, what I did at most was to give comfort to a scattered flock (White 1983, 179).

This is strong testimony to the confidence felt in White’s prophetic gifts, not to mention her power of raising money from distant admirers. But apostasy from her role in the church and the rigour of her teaching on diet and health was not unknown.

In Australia, the most public of these acts of dissension was what Adventist histories refer to as “The McCullagh Apostasy”. Two elders of the Adventist church in Adelaide, Stephen McCullagh and C.F. Hawkins, declared their disagreement with White in a telegram she received in March, 1897. The dire influence of Mrs. McCullagh, who did not accept the principles of health reform, was considered the source of dissension. Elder McCullagh resigned his ministry and began holding public meetings at which he publicized his objections to her work. These included the charge, in a letter from S.N. Haskell to White dated 5 April 1897, that White was worth £10,000 to £20,000 and had spent a considerable sum on her own house, all the while professing to believe the Lord is coming soon; that tea drinking and flesh eating had been made tests among believers and especially ministers; that her books were prepared by others, and that she merely supplied ideas and books to select from; and that people were not educated for the ministry, but only for canvassing work to sell White’s books (White 1983, 282). This last accusation was unfair. Canvassing was resorted to in the 1890s during a time of deep depression in Australia, when there was little money to be had from any source. Throughout 1894 the Australian missionaries had relied almost entirely on unreliable sums forwarded from America. Writing to Br. Olsen on 24 June 1894, White complained: “My workers needed shoes, and some other articles of clothing; but we had to say, We can not pay you your wages... I have the peace of Christ though I am still pressed with sadness as I think of the cause of God in America, and as I see the great battle with poverty in this country. The way the banks have been managed has ruined the country” (White 1983, 40–89).

In his letter of resignation, dated 23 March 1897, McCullagh declared his unease with the Adventists’ doctrine of the sanctuary, the excessive reliance on the authority of Mrs. White, and the rigid rules of diet as a test of religious standing (White 1983, 280). White was convinced that McCullagh’s apostasy was the work of the devil. On 6 April 1897 she wrote to Edson, Emma and Willie White that she rejected the direction of Hawkins and McCullagh teaching as “going in for holiness altogether” (White Letters, 100–213). Holiness is the movement which swept through Evangelicalism from the 1870s and which demanded Christians strive for a second stage beyond conversion. According to Bebbington, holiness had a major impact on Evangelical communities and led in the United States to the formation of many new
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churches (Bebbington 1989, 151–80). White was determined that the new currents would not scatter the Adventist flock. From “Sunnyside”, her home at Cooranbong, she denounced McCullagh as an apostate and an agent of Satan:

Christ came to our world not to aid Satan in working up rebellion but to put down rebellion. . . .McCullagh is the life and soul of the rebellion he has instigated. He has apostasized from the truth, – a secessionist (White Letters, 100–213).

White had more to offer her people besides a clear direction in theological disputes. As outlined by White, she facilitated the growth of a manufacturing and marketing enterprise which supported the movement financially. White had her first vision of “the great subject of health reform” in 1863 and, according to Blake, she pursued this with millennial enthusiasm which served to replace that earlier focussed on the Second Coming (Blake 1987). Dr John Harvey Kellogg, a physician and follower of White, sent out samples of his newly developed health foods from Battle Creek, Michigan to Australia in 1897. The first of the Adventist medical institutions, known as sanitariums, had been established at Battle Creek in 1866. In Australia, the opening of the Health Home in Sydney, now the Sydney Adventist Hospital, in late 1896 was the principal development of White’s Australian activism in this area. At the same time, the training of medical missionaries at Summer Hill in Sydney, the Avondale school farm and the establishment of health food production occupied her attention. The manufacture of health foods by the Sanitarium Health Food Factory began at Cooranbong in 1899. It has become the most successful of White’s legacies in Australia and, according to the Sanitarium web site (which carefully makes no reference to Adventism), the Sanitarium Health Food Company currently employs 1550 people in Australia and New Zealand and earns revenue of around $200 million.6

By century’s end, White began to feel restless. Although mission work was also proceeding satisfactorily, building on the camp meetings in town and country districts throughout the eastern states, it had been hard to make progress. In good weather, camp meetings were festive occasions; when it rained, as it did in Maitland in November 1899, they could prove very uncomfortable. Ellen White celebrated her seventy-second birthday soon after this occasion. White undoubtedly found personal satisfaction in her work in Australia, despite setbacks such as the McCullagh Apostasy. On 6 December 1897, invigorated by a successful camp meeting, she wrote to her son Edson that the interest in the work resembled that which they had seen in 1843 and 1844, the years of peak Millerite expectancy. She felt that interest was widespread “among the best class of people – not the wealthiest, but the most intelligent” (White Letters, 100–213).

Nevertheless, in 1900, Ellen White again felt God’s call; “I am needed in America” (White Letters, 454). At her last union conference, held in August at Cooranbong, thirty-four delegates assembled, representing 1,986 baptized believers throughout Australia and New Zealand. She left on 1 October 1900,
writing in her diary “I have not a tear to shed. I am only changing my work under the same General, and I go to another part of the field where they are calling earnestly for our help” (White Letters, 459). White returned to the United States where she continued to work until her death in 1915.

CONCLUSION

White established her prophetic credentials in the United States in the wake of the Great Disappointment. It is a true measure of her charisma that she remained the undisputed spiritual leader of the church she founded until the time of her death. Her authority was however, built on sure foundations. This was the tradition within British and American millennial Protestantism of female prophecy. This tradition was not feminist, but it did allow for the highest level of creative and spiritual leadership to be accorded to women and men without distinction of gender. White’s understanding of this tradition meant that she was free to build a life’s work of considerable ambition. Although modest by comparison with (say) the institution established in her lifetime by Mary MacKillop, the sainted Australian nun and educational pioneer who was her contemporary, White laid the seeds for a major church during her time in Australia.

Preaching a message of good health, education, mission and godliness, White followed a clear path to securing the institutional base of her work. The sanitarium, school and health food enterprise established during her time in Australia was intended to further the work she began in the United States. It is probably impossible now to determine if White intended more than this for the Australian venture. Did she ever imagine that Australia might be a new America for her – a promised land in which her work might progress, free from the theological squabbles which had challenged her at home? If so, she is likely to have been disappointed. Her Australian experience was marred by the sectarian spirit, and by the attraction of other currents in Evangelicalism. But these difficulties she overcame, leaving Australia with her authority undiminished and in good order for future growth.

NOTES

1 The “burning” refers to the repeated fires of the Protestant revival known as the Second Great Awakening which Barkun suggests made fertile ground for the reception of Miller’s predictions.
2 Premillennialism is the belief that Christ will return before the beginning of the 1000 year reign of the saints anticipated in Rev. 20. Postmillennialism is the belief that Christ will not return and usher in the end of the world until after the 1000 year reign has been completed. Scholars of millenarian movements tend to regard premillennial movements as more impatient and likely to end in violence than postmillennial ones.
Rev. 13:11 “Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon”. The first beast was identified, conventionally, with the papacy.

I thank my student Dumitru Evghenie for alerting me to this passage.

Rev. 12: 1–6 (RSV) And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God.

For example, on the page “Celebrating 100 Years” on the main Sanitarium Health Food Company web site http://www.sanitarium.com.au/ourstory/100years.htm (10 August 2000)

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