Book Review


There are books with content that one can understand in a couple of minutes or read in a few hours. Others need days, and some can take you weeks. This book actually will entertain you – and challenge you – for months. The author admits that it turned out “a little longer than originally intended” (p. 22); with its more than 700 pages of text, it is actually the longest by far in all the Adventist Pioneer Library biographies.

To be honest, at the outset I doubted that anything of significance could be added to what we already know about 19th century Adventist history. Had not all the letters, manuscripts, and papers been already worked upon in dozens of research projects, dissertations, and popular publications? I only accepted the assignment because I knew the author was among the premier Adventist historians and I presumed that the book would make interesting reading in my Christmas holidays, substituting for novels (which I rarely read), thanks to its narrative layout and dramatic content.

Before commenting on the subject, some key details, and insights gained from this biography, let me highlight what I consider to be the main importance of the book. Beyond presenting to the scholarly world and to the general readership a comprehensive and incredibly thoroughly researched biography of John Nevins Andrews, this monograph represents a real breakthrough in Adventist historiography. We knew of various aspects of the relationships and conflicts between the denomination’s pioneers before, but no author hitherto attempted to use anything like the socio-psychological historiographical approach that Valentine has chosen as his main method. He masterfully weaves accounts of developing personal interactions and individual struggles into the fabric of developing church realities, theological issues, and the denomination’s expansion in such a way that, for the first time, proper
space is given to that aspect of human life that characterizes much of our existence in general: the psyche and the web of relations with those who are close to us.¹

But this is not all. The author combines an astounding empathy with Andrews (as well as with those who surrounded him), with what I consider an almost ethnographic approach to Andrews’s life. Thus, the monograph is also a history of the mentality of early Adventism, resulting from a perspective that comes so close to participant observation that a reader often feels that the author actually accompanied Andrews during his travels, interviewed him, and obtained information from other informants around him. We know, of course, that this was not the case. The fortunate situation that contemporaries’ diaries exist (e.g. of his aunt Persis, pp. 89ff., and of Swiss apprentice Jean Vuilleumier, pp. 668ff.), as well as stacks of letters and other archival material, is helpful in this regard, but we can only marvel at how Valentine weaves insights from these documents into an account that reveals the atmosphere, values, and patterns that characterized Andrews’s epoch and Adventists in this defining phase of their history.

On a more theoretical level, the volume combines elements of various narrative schemes in a subtle but appropriate manner. Particularly in religious history, it is easy to find examples of how authors follow (mostly unconsciously), one particular approach of those outlined in Hayden White’s classic *Metahistory*. He distinguishes what he calls the “four archetypal story forms”² romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire; and we know examples even in Adventist historiography of sceptical history (“satire” – focusing on that which does not develop well), hagiography (“romance” – the good always overcomes evil) and conservative approaches (“comedy” – in the end, everything is okay). Valentine’s narrative is at times close to the type that Hayden White

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¹ Valentine does not name his approach. Yet his frequent discussions of personality conflicts (see discussion and page references below), extended reflections on Andrews’s actions, and regular references to his feelings, perceptions, sense of inadequacy, issues of blame, guilt, and remorse indicate that this really is a key theme (cf. pp. 19, 21–22, 714). Moreover, the way the author presents these episodes demonstrates that he circumnavigated the “dangers of superficial psychobiography” (230, footnote 79, referring to Kay Redfield Jamison. *Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York, NY: Free Press Paperback, 1993).

calls “tragedy” (the failure to match ideals), but he actually incorporates aspects of all the other three story forms as well, which makes the overall presentation diversified and balanced.

The monograph’s topic, is of course, John Andrews – at least at one level of reading. No full account of this pioneer’s life existed before. One wonders why: was it because a 1985 collection of papers, published by Andrews University Press,\(^3\) suggested that all had been said? The papers dated from 1974, however – a time when the General Conference Archives and the research infrastructure needed to do in-depth studies such as these had not even come into existence. Or is it because this man, who was certainly the fourth in importance among the earliest Adventists (next to the Whites and Bates), seemed somewhat of a failure at the end of his life? Andrews’s legacy has been a chequered one in the denomination’s collective memory: a man who was a great scholar compared with all the other leaders – but too scholarly for the Whites’ taste (p. 717); an American with unusual linguistic abilities – but struggling to communicate with the French Swiss surroundings in which he worked for almost ten years (pp. 538–541); the movement’s first official missionary – but one who did not produce the success that his brethren back home expected. Perhaps the last period of his life simply did not look as promising for a biographer-to-be as for instance Kellogg, Daniells, the Whites, and Miller.

But Valentine now teaches us that this life was much richer and more significant than the surface reveals. This is why the book actually is as much a book on Adventism until the early 1880s as it is about Andrews himself. It is a walk through its organizational development and emerging institutions, and various experiments of the leaders. One meets almost all the key personalities of the time, gains a sense of the discourse on mission in the period, and how the prophetic role of Ellen White worked in practice. There are some elements of theology, of course, but the often forgotten weight of personal relationships (as well as of kinship), are given the rightful place they ought to have in a historical account of people who constituted the movement with which they identified. In short, reading this book is the equivalent of several university seminars in early Adventist history.

At the same time, it is a prime example of portraying and assessing how memories of people’s decisions and actions can be lost, narrowed, or changed.

Valentine both portrays how Adventists sacrificed themselves – and how at times the movement sacrificed individuals. Granting or receiving insufficient support, risking health and life, and the constant pressures of working on minimum budgets: all this may have felt normal at the time. Although friction and lament about such situations is a recurring theme, chronic attempts of identifying who is to be blamed when things went wrong in such a framework indicate that it was easy for the movement to retain one side of a story in its memory. In the case of Andrews, although Valentine does not set out to “vindicate” him against less than enthusiastic assessments from the brethren in far away America during his ministry in Europe, he clearly comes to the conclusion that contemporary critiques of his mission approach were largely flawed and represented a monocultural perspective of those who had never set foot on European soil (pp. 589–594, 665–669, 701–708).

Since the book is so long, this review cannot comment on all chapters and not even on all the major aspects of Andrews’s life, his contributions during the 54 years granted to him, and the author’s account of the same. Of course, this biography describes almost every knowable detail of John Nevins’s background, formation, and ministry: his upbringing, the aftermath of the Great Disappointment as a teenager, the shut door period and the peculiar circumstances at Paris, Maine; and his early ministry, his moves to Rochester, Waukon, Battle Creek, and Switzerland. Valentine also illuminates his various roles as a pastor, writer, Conference President, de facto and de jure General Conference President (pp. 323–327, 333–354), theologian (e.g. of the Sabbath, pp. 447–468), missionary (chapter 17ff.), and publisher. Of special interest are those many instances when he played a less official yet decisive role in the defining developments and crises of the young denomination: the beginnings of publishing; theological discussions such as the beginning time of Sabbath (pp. 156–157), the organization question in the 1850s, debates on Ellen White’s prophetic ministry (see, e.g., pp. 240–242, 321), health reform (pp. 281–285), the young denomination’s stance towards the Civil War (285–290), the Battle Creek church purge (pp. 394–398), and many instances of leadership friction. And, finally, the account of the challenges he encountered as the European mission started reveals what most missionaries experience even today. However, it also conveys a sense of the particular perplexities of the period. He was the first missionary sent by a movement that had believed just one generation earlier that proclamation beyond Millerite circles was against God’s
will. Andrews was challenged by flawed beginnings, language learning, cultural differences, misunderstandings, disappointment, economic crises, tragic losses of family members, extended phases of disease, and the gnawing question of why God does not grant more success if the end of time is to come so rapidly.

Underneath these various parts of the Andrews story as told by Valentine lies a common thread that can only be detected when one reads the entire tome. Again and again, the author analyses the leadership styles of Andrews, James White and others and thus presents a narrative that succeeds in applying insights from social science in an unobtrusive way. Thus the biographical and documentary framework is enhanced by an interpretative lens; Valentine uses enough of it to add a flavour of meaningful interpretation, yet fortunately he does not exaggerate this approach (which would have been easy for a Professor Emeritus of Leadership and Administration).

The portrayal of the instances of conflict among leaders forms the fabric of Valentine’s contribution. It is here that his account links the psychological, social, cultural, and leadership aspects in the most forceful manner. These occurrences abound, and I will list them only to substantiate my claim that they play a crucial role in the narrative as well as in Andrews’s life: conflicts around and among Millerites (pp. 59, 63ff.); conflicts with “fanatics,” i.e. the Paris group, to which Andrews belonged, in the painful years after 1844, with his later father in-law judged insane (87–95); discord with the Whites (pp. 124–127); “strains in personal relationships among the publishing personnel in Rochester” in the context of “close, communal living” (p. 153); Ellen’s comments on J. N. Andrews’s relationship with Annie (pp. 160–161) and Angeline (pp. 173–176); conflicts at Battle Creek between Uriah Smith and the Whites

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4 A few examples: in several instances, Valentine calls Andrews “James White’s Melanchthon” (cf. the section pp. 145–150 and 19, 139, 180, 204, 657) and thus compares the leadership role of the historic scholar among the Magisterial Reformers with the “Adventist Luther,” James White. Beyond observations on leadership in the sections on conflict (see below), comments on leadership theory viz. leadership approaches are usually short but penetrating (see, e.g., p. 590 on lack of policy and micromanagement; p. 599 on the repeal of the denomination’s 1873 statement on leadership by the General Conference; and p. 715 with a short overall evaluation).

5 Cyprian Stevens was one of those post-Millerites who were crawling on the streets to manifest humility, and together with his family he stopped working for several years due to his conviction that this would indicate that he did not any longer believe in Jesus’ soon coming.
(with Andrews being indirectly involved as the brother-in-law of Smith’s wife; pp. 193–194); numerous instances of clashes between James White and Andrews (plus his family; pp. 206–207, 224–226, 276–277, 295–296, 423–433); and severe controversy between James and several other leaders, including Andrews (pp. 232–261 [chapter 9], 375–386, 388–394, 473–503 [chapter 16]), not to mention the tensions regarding Andrews’s missionary methods in Europe during almost the entire last decade of this life. Had the Great Controversy motif not become a crucial theological ingredient of Adventism, one might almost be tempted to attribute defining importance to interpersonal controversy among these 19th century believers.

Clearly this book is not for those in search of hagiography or for the faint-hearted when it comes to the glories of the Adventist past. Valentine tells the story as it was (at least as it must have been for the participants), without embellishing the unpleasant parts. In fact, the lengthy listing in the paragraph above is also to give the reader a sense of how draining especially the crises at Battle Creek must have been; they kept repeating themselves, and the solace for the bewildered reader is that it must have been much worse for the people involved. There were instances of public shaming (chapter 16, pp. 238, 251, 266; cf. also p. 424), which built on the practice of “plain speaking,” and in 1870, almost the entire Battle Creek Church membership was excommunicated (pp. 389–400); of about 300, only 12 remained (p. 395), with Andrews being among the remaining ones. He had the gift of submission, even to the point of “subservience” (p. 426), as Valentine explains; halting self-destructing tendencies among the movement’s leadership was evidently not his strength.

This points toward the connection between the psychogram of Andrews, which the author presents from the outset (pp. 19, 21), and doctrine. Although this giant of early Adventism was instrumental in clarifying, defining, and systematizing many aspects of the movement’s tenets of faith, he essentially remained an apologist. His theological contribution, which Valentine outlines in two separate chapters on the Sabbath (chapter 15) and other areas of doctrine (chapter 21: restorationist theology, sanctuary, soul sleep), was a service

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For references (about 20!), see the index, which is slightly uncommon for biographies but extremely helpful. The phenomenon of “plain speaking” or “plain speech,” which meant a direct and public reference to someone’s perceived fault, was apparently as much a New England practice as it was typical for Adventists at the time; cf. the explanations pp. 390–392.
to his church largely by collecting arguments and making the denomination’s beliefs seem plausible. Andrews’s personal centre of theological attention, however, was the law and God’s judgement (see, e.g. pp. 50, 56, and passim) – and his analogous personality trait was a crushing sense of duty. This overly strong motif had roots in his New England upbringing (pp. 27–28), but the concomitant fear-driven theology, which somehow combined the negative side effects of both Calvinistic (a judgemental God, but with no way to prove that you are among the predestined) and Arminian strands (total responsibility of humans for their free-will decisions) made a disastrous soteriological cocktail. One wonders what would have happened to Andrews in 1888, especially after James White, who often defined God’s will for him, could no longer do so. While his notions of “duty” propelled him to Europe to propagate the Adventist interpretation of Christianity, the joy of the gospel apparently remained dim to the very missionary who sacrificed his daughter and his own life for the cause.

One could comment on a host of other topics, but that would mean writing an entire review article, which was not intended. Two should be enough: health (as an example of external factors) and ministry (an issue demonstrating the internal workings of an organization).

(1) I am writing in the midst of the international Corona virus crisis, with governments around the globe shutting down public life to protect the vulnerable. At Andrews’s time, tuberculosis was an unseen enemy of humanity that threatened everyone and took its toll in a manner that exceeds our imagination. The millions who regularly died of what was then called “consumption” characterized the period and could hardly be addressed theologically: Had people not always died from disease? But why Andrews at age 54, so few years after his daughter Mary? And so many other early Adventists (Nathaniel White and printer Luman Masters in 1853 [p. 154]; Annie Smith [p. 160]; several who went to Switzerland with Andrews in his later years; and, in earlier years, James White, Ellen White, and James’s sister Anna – all were sick and possibly contracted tuberculosis)? “The good old times, they were terrible” (as Otto Bettman’s classic puts it).

(2) Changing times bring changing expectations; as one reads about the personalities who shaped the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its first two

7 The index lists 19 instances for “sense of duty.”
generations, one cannot help but wonder if they would make it into the ranks of ministers today. Apart from the well-known fact that individuals on all sides in the episodes of friction had non-Trinitarian or anti-Trinitarian theologies and would not be even accepted as baptismal candidates – would not the character traits, individual styles, and values that made them suitable for working for a nascent denomination prevent them from serving as employees of a well-structured and democratic organization today? These questions point to the limits of “learning from history”; while human beings always have their peculiar shortcomings and challenges, each phase of the past highlights different demands on those who “made history.”

This leads us to the general evaluation of the book and the author’s achievements in writing it. First let me state that – with the only minor blemish being a couple of typos (for which I charge the unknown copy editor rather than the author, and which I will communicate to him directly) – this book is, in my view, worth two doctoral dissertations not only with regard to length but also in terms of contribution. In the introduction, he expresses his “hope … that this study will help a new generation of readers see this first scholar-evangelist of Adventism, and his associates, as real people – people of the nineteenth century who believed deeply that God was using them, in spite of their failings and missteps, to build a movement that had a message about the end times and about accountability before a divine judgment that their world needed to hear” (p. 22). The author certainly did everything to enable readers to come to this conclusion. To put it more technically, this is church history as socio-psychological history at its best on both the micro and meso levels, and certainly an inspiring piece of literature about impressive personalities as well as a most perceptive appreciation of such real life believers’ decisions, limitations, and achievements. As such, this biography is refreshing in many ways with regard to our understanding of Andrews and all those who were close to him, including James and Ellen White, and thus of Adventism at large, and will be indispensable reading for all future students of Adventist history.

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