

Marsh, Frank Lewis (1899–1992)

JAMES L. HAYWARD

James L. Hayward, Ph.D. (Washington State University), is a professor emeritus of biology at Andrews University where he taught for 30 years. He is widely published in literature dealing with ornithology, behavioral ecology, and paleontology, and has contributed numerous articles to Adventist publications. His book, *The Creation-Evolution Controversy: An Annotated Bibliography* (Scarecrow Press, 1998), won a *Choice* award from the American Library Association. He also edited *Creation Reconsidered* (Association of Adventist Forums, 2000).

Frank Lewis Marsh was the first Seventh-day Adventist to earn a Ph.D. in biology. He taught at several Adventist institutions and was the author of numerous articles and books in defense of young-earth creationism.

Early Life and Education

Francis (later Frank) Marsh was born on October 18, 1899, the youngest of three children parented by Wilson and Annabel Marsh. Wilson Marsh worked as a grain and stock farmer on property owned by his father near Aledo, Mercer County, Illinois. In addition to farming, Wilson did some barbering and sold sundry items to the neighbors on the side.¹

Francis attended Adventist church school beginning in first grade, but as he got older he gradually became aware that his name could sound feminine to people. One day a superintendent of schools visited his classroom to get acquainted with the students. The superintendent read the name of each student from the class roster and asked each child to stand. "Francis Marsh, is *she* here this morning?" she asked. His fellow students broke out in raucous laughter as Francis stood, red-faced. When he got home that day he insisted that his family start calling him Frank. From then on he signed his name "Frank L." or "Frank Lewis" Marsh. Many years later he made the change legal.²

Frank attended Fox River Academy (later to become Hinsdale Academy) in Sheridan, Illinois for his high school years, with aspirations to become a physician.³ But finances were tight, so following graduation, Frank took



Frank L. Marsh.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

nurse's training at Hinsdale Sanitarium and Hospital and earned a registered nurse certificate. He eventually moved on to Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC, now Andrews University), where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Literary Studies (1927) and a Bachelor of Science degree in Scientific Studies (1929).⁴ While at EMC, he studied geology under the creationist George McCready Price, whom he came to highly respect and emulate in his own work and writing.⁵

Early Teaching and Graduate Education

After finishing college, Marsh took a job teaching mathematics and science at Hinsdale Academy near Chicago. While on the Hinsdale faculty he took advanced classes in biology at the University of Chicago and earned a Master of Science degree in zoology at Northwestern University in 1935 with a thesis title of "A regional study of *Samia cecropia* and nine associated primary parasites and hyperparasites presenting data on the behavior, biology, and interrelationships of these insects."

Following completion of his degree, Marsh assumed a biology professorship at Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, a position he held for the next fifteen years. In 1940, while teaching at Union, he completed a doctorate in botany at the University of Nebraska. His dissertation title was "Water content and osmotic pressure of certain prairie plants in relation to environment."⁶ This achievement earned him the distinction of being the first Seventh-day Adventist to earn a PhD in biology.⁷ In 1950 he became chair of the Biology Department at EMC, a position he held until 1958. After six years at the Geoscience Research Institute (see below), Marsh returned to Andrews in 1964 and taught biology until 1971, at which time he received professor emeritus status.⁸

Involvement with Creationism

Marsh's first book, *Fundamental Biology*, self-published in 1941, declared that modern life reflects the cosmic struggle between God and Satan. This struggle, he wrote, resulted in a degeneration of life largely as a result of Satan's manipulation through "amalgamation" or hybridization of the original "created kinds" depicted in Genesis 1.⁹ He coined the term "baramin" to refer to these original created forms. He wrote that the term is "built upon the Hebrew words *bara*, 'created,' and *min*, 'kind,' for these units. I suggest this word because it gets entirely away from the idea of *species*—a word which has come to mean something different for each person who employs it."¹⁰ He believed it would be possible to identify baramins by doing hybridization experiments. Crosses between two different species that resulted in viable offspring would be considered members of the same baramin.¹¹ This notion continued to enjoy currency among conservative creationists. In 1990, Kurt P. Wise, a creationist at Bryan College, coined the term "baraminology" to refer to the creationist system of classification of organisms.¹²

Harold W. Clark, an Adventist creationist at Pacific Union College, agreed with Marsh that cross-breeding was responsible for much of the biological diversity seen in the world today. But he took the concept a step further and applied it to humans. Clark suggested that humans had mated with apes, an occurrence that led to the production of “degraded” races of people.¹³ His view was based on the statement by the Adventist prophet, Ellen G. White, that “if there was one sin above another which called for the destruction of the race by the flood, it was the base crime of amalgamation of man and beast which defaced the image of God and caused confusion everywhere.”¹⁴ The issue came to a head within the denomination during the 1940s.

To resolve this issue, fifteen church officials assembled in San Francisco on September 8, 1947 to listen to the respective arguments of Clark and Marsh. Among other evidences, Clark argued that the skulls of members of certain living tribes in Africa and Malaysia contained ape-like characteristics. Marsh, by contrast, objected that Clark’s interpretation was racist and suggested that White’s ambiguous statement could not refer to crosses *between* humans and animals, which he believed to be physiologically impossible. In concert with his mentor Price, Marsh suggested that White actually meant “the amalgamation of man and (of) beast,” a reference to the interbreeding of human races with one another and of animal types with one another. After 1947, this became the favored interpretation of White’s statement among Adventists.¹⁵

Marsh became involved in another contentious issue, this time with Adventist physicists, over the age of the earth. Based on the laws of physics and the science of radiometric dating, several Adventist scientists during the 1940s and 1950s began to promulgate the view that, although life was created only a few thousand years ago, the earth itself was created billions of years ago. In this view, between the time when “God created the heavens and the earth” recorded in Genesis 1:1 and the creation week depicted in the remainder of Genesis 1, there was a vast time gap for which no events were recorded in Scripture.¹⁶ Marsh, however, believed this view involved a serious logical problem: if fossils were found in very old rocks, then the fossils themselves would also have to be very old. This was impossible, he said, given the temporal constraints of Genesis. He opined there would need to be a “parting of the ways between belief in an inspired Bible literally read and in the accuracy of the [radiometric] timeclocks.”¹⁷ Subsequent conservative Adventist interpretations, however, often tended to overlook Marsh’s concern and supported the gap-theory interpretation, although they rarely dealt directly with the contradiction pointed out by Marsh.¹⁸

In 1958, Marsh was called to serve as a founding member of Geoscience Research Institute (GRI), commissioned by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to investigate the relationship between geology and the biblical record. Tensions developed, however, between Marsh and his two younger colleagues, P. Edgar Hare and Richard M. Ritland. Marsh frequently left statements by the church prophet, Ellen G. White, on their desks, believing her perspectives to be authoritative over scientific interpretation. Hare and Ritland, by contrast, believed that White’s comments should be evaluated in the context of scientific evidence. This difference of perspectives led Marsh to retire from GRI in 1964.¹⁹

Marsh was the only Seventh-day Adventist to serve as one of the ten founding members of the Creation Research Society, established in 1963.²⁰

Publications

During the course of his career, Marsh wrote numerous articles in denominational publications and other periodicals. His books included *Fundamental Biology* (1941); *Evolution, Creation and Science* (1944); *Evolution or Special Creation?* (1947); *Studies in Creationism* (1950); *Life, Man and Time* (1957); *Variation and Fixity in Nature* (1976); and *Prairie Tree: Early Days on the Northern Illinois Prairie* (1978).

Interactions with Evolutionists

Marsh's interactions with evolutionists were cordial and respectful, even though he disagreed with their conclusions. Theodosius Dobzhansky, the famous evolutionary geneticist from Columbia University with whom Marsh corresponded, reviewed Marsh's book *Evolution, Creation, and Science* in the journal *American Naturalist*. Dobzhansky stated his surprise that Marsh had "provided a tolerably readable review of the pertinent facts . . .," although Dobzhansky disagreed with the creationist's conclusions.²¹

Death and Legacy

Frank Lewis Marsh died on July 14, 1992, age 92, having contributed substantially to fundamentalist creationist views, both inside and outside Seventh-day Adventism.²²

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NOTES

1. Frank Lewis Marsh, *Prairie Tree: Early Days on the Northern Illinois Prairie* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978), 219, 220, 237.
2. *Ibid.*, 240, 241.
3. *Ibid.*, 274, 275, 296, 297.
4. "Register of the Frank Lewis Marsh Papers (Collection 17)," Adventist Heritage Center, James White Library, Andrews University, 1981, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.centerforadventistresearch.org/manuscripts/marsh-frank/>; *The Cardinal 1927* (Berrien Springs, MI:

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7. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 149.

8. "Frank L. Marsh obituary," *Focus: The Andrews University Magazine*, Fall 1992, 31.

9. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 149.

10. Frank Lewis Marsh, *Evolution, Creation, and Science* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1947), 174, 175; Numbers, *The Creationists*, 150.

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16. R. H. Brown, "Radioactive Time Clocks," in Harold G. Coffin, *Creation—Accident or Design?* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1969), 273–296; R. H. Brown, "R. H. Brown Comments on Radioactive Age Panel," *Report of the Fifth Quadennial [sic] Session of the Applied Arts and Sciences*, Lincoln, Nebraska, August 22–28, 1956, 22–24.

17. Frank Lewis Marsh, "The Conflict between Uranium and Thorium Datings and Bible Chronology," *Report of the Fifth Quadennial [sic] Session of the Applied Arts and Sciences*, 14–22.

18. For example, see "Deposition of Harold G. Coffin in the United States District Court, Eastern District of Arkansas, Western Division," Monday, November 16, 1981, 13–14, accessed on May 15, 2017

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19. Numbers, 320–323, 326.

20. *Ibid.*, 249–259.

21. Numbers, 151–152; Theodosius Dobzhansky, "Reviewed Work(s): *Evolution, Creation, and Science* by Frank

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