



Roy Branson

Photo courtesy of *Spectrum* magazine.

Branson, Roy Elwyn (1938–2015)

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Roy Branson was a Seventh-day Adventist theologian, social activist, ethicist, educator and, for more than two decades, editor of *Spectrum* magazine.

Early Life in the Middle East (1938-1950)

Roy Elwyn Branson was born on July 3, 1938 in Portland, Oregon, to Ernest Branson and Ardice Detamore Branson,¹ just eight weeks before the family sailed on the *S. S. Queen Mary* to mission work in Cairo, Egypt.² Roy's family had deep Adventist roots, with missionary parents and a grandfather, William Henry Branson, who served as a church administrator in Africa and China and later as president of the General Conference from 1950 to 1954. Roy's uncle, his mother's brother, was Fordyce Detamore, a renowned evangelist.

Roy's father, Ernest Branson, was president of the Missouri Conference when Roy was born but had already accepted a call to serve as superintendent of the Egyptian Mission. Roy's mother, Ardice, was visiting her parents in Portland, Oregon, where she gave birth, then had to travel back across the country to sail from New York with her husband, her newborn son and Roy's brother, Bruce William, who was 10 years old. The family landed in England, then traveled across Europe to Naples, Italy, where they took another boat to Alexandria and finally a train to their new home in Cairo.³ Ernest Branson's new territory boasted only six Adventist churches and 163 members.⁴

The rumble that became World War II was already building when the Branson family arrived in Egypt. The Allies in North Africa defended against invasions first by the Italians and then the Germans under General Rommel in 1940 and 1941. Roy's earliest memories were of air-raid sirens and soldiers.⁵

On July 1, 1942, when the Germans were only 70 miles from Alexandria, the Branson family was evacuated and took a train to Suez, where they boarded a ship for the Eritrean port of Massawa. They stayed at an American army base for two weeks, then traveled on to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, where the family stayed at the Adventist hospital compound.⁶

Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie had a good relationship with the Adventist missionaries in Addis Ababa and during their six months in Ethiopia, Roy's mother Ardice (who was able to converse with Selassie in French) held a small school for the three princesses, the emperor's granddaughters.⁷ Four-year-old Roy tagged along to the school every day,⁸ and later he recalled how the princesses would often kiss him, which he claimed to have hated.

Ardice, with Bruce and Roy, traveled back to their Cairo home before Christmas 1942. On the journey, their plane crashed during take-off (fortunately no one was injured) so they had to travel in a caravan of trucks. Trucks behind them were shot at, and the drivers were so frightened they drove over a cliff, while trucks in front of them were robbed. But the final leg of the journey, on a boat down the Nile, was pleasant, according to a dispatch written by Ardice.⁹

Soon after their return to Cairo, Ernest Branson was appointed superintendent of the newly-formed Middle East Union, headquartered in Beirut, Lebanon on the Mediterranean. Roy lived with his parents on the fourth floor of the building that served as the church's headquarters for the Middle East. Roy's schooling was with the few other missionaries' children who lived in the building, taught by one of the mothers.¹⁰ Roy's father was also

chairman of the board of Middle East College and his mother was on the college faculty, teaching mathematics.¹¹

Greater New York Academy (1950-1955)

In 1950, the summer Roy turned 12, his family returned to the United States for good. After a summer spent attending camp meetings around the country, and the General Conference session in San Francisco, Ernest Branson took a job pastoring the Grand Avenue Church in Oakland, California.¹² Only weeks into the new pastorate, Ernest was called to the presidency of the Greater New York Conference. Roy arrived in Queens, New York, with his family in October 1950.¹³

Roy skipped the rest of his eighth-grade year and went straight into Greater New York Academy in the Woodside neighborhood of Queens. Roy recalled that his first year in New York was a difficult one – after failing a series of school tests, he “had a sort of nervous breakdown.”¹⁴

But by his sophomore year at Greater New York Academy, Roy was excelling academically and becoming engaged in the life of New York City. He began taking the subway to museums, parks and libraries. He loved the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and got cheap standing-room tickets to plays and concerts whenever he could.¹⁵ He wrote a story for the *Youth's Instructor* called “Prepare!” after he heard a plane crash near his home in Queens, grabbed his coat, and rushed to the scene on the subway.¹⁶

Roy began working as an actor, performing in a number of skits for the Adventist church's national television show *Faith for Today*, broadcast live from the ABC studio at 7 West 66th Street, near Central Park. In the summer of 1953, Roy was a delegate from the Greater New York Conference to the Pan American Youth Congress in San Francisco, where he also performed in a skit with *Faith for Today*.¹⁷ (He later said his one regret as an actor was that he always had to play the good kid—never the villain.) In 1955, Roy won a prize for an article he wrote for the *Youth's Instructor* about his experience acting for television.¹⁸ In another *Youth's Instructor* story, Roy described meeting the famous conductors Arturo Toscanini and Robert Shaw and giving both a copy of the Adventist tract *Present Truth*.¹⁹ Roy was the senior class pastor when he graduated from Greater New York Academy, not yet 17 years old.²⁰

During his academy years Roy's grandfather, William H. Branson, became president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, his father was busy with conference work and starting the New York Center, an Adventist evangelistic center in Manhattan,²¹ as well as graduate study at New York University, and his mother was studying for a master's degree at Teachers College Columbia University.²² Ardice Branson then worked in different positions at *Faith for Today*, including as publicity director, and her byline appeared in a number of church papers across the country.²³

Atlantic Union College (1955-1959)

In 1955, Roy went on to Atlantic Union College (AUC), in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, where his parents had also attended.²⁴ Roy was very involved in student life at AUC. In his second year, he was literary editor of AUC's yearbook, *The Minuteman*,²⁵ as well as business manager of the school newspaper, *The Lancastrian*.²⁶ He was editor of *The Lancastrian* his junior year,²⁷ and the next year, Roy was elected president of the senior class.²⁸

During his college years Roy was the treasurer for AUC's chapter of the American Temperance Society (part of which involved traveling to area churches and performing skits for the young people),²⁹ Sabbath School superintendent,³⁰ area supervisor of AUC's Ingathering campaign,³¹ and part of a four-student committee assigned to rewrite the student handbook in a more "chatty" style.³²

During summer vacations, and when he had time during the school year, Roy worked as a literature evangelist, including a summer in Germany.³³ He continued canvassing for nine summers, helping him to finance not only an Adventist college education, but also graduate school.³⁴ He graduated from AUC in 1959 with a major in English and minors in religion and German. In his president's message, printed in the yearbook, Roy asserted that the aim of the senior class was "effective service to contemporary society,"³⁵ essentially setting out the goal he would pursue for the rest of his life.

It was while he was at AUC that Roy conceived the idea of a magazine that would publish the best of Adventist thinking on a given subject, and wrote a paper for English professor Otilie Stafford's Advanced Composition Class proposing the creation of such a journal. The idea would be realized 10 years later with publication of *Spectrum*.³⁶

Meanwhile, after eight years as president of the Greater New York Conference, Roy's father had suffered a heart attack and so stepped down in 1958 to move to a less-demanding job as pastor of the El Monte Church in southern California. On December 15, 1960, when he had just turned 54 years old and Roy was 22, Ernest Branson died suddenly of another heart attack.³⁷

Graduate Degrees and Activism (1959-1967)

Following his graduation from Atlantic Union College, Roy went on to the University of Chicago, where he earned an M.A. degree from the Division of Humanities in English in 1961.³⁸

In 1962, he received another master's degree, this time in religion from Andrews University.³⁹ While at Andrews, Branson was accepted into the Harvard School of Divinity to study for a Ph.D. in religious ethics.⁴⁰ In his dissertation, "Theories of Religious Pluralism and the American Founding Fathers," which he successfully defended in 1968, Branson wrote about the importance of voluntary associations in the relationship of religion to government and society, concentrating specifically on James Madison's distinctive arguments in *The Federalist Papers*.⁴¹

While working toward his Ph.D. at Harvard, Branson was also involved in a number of other pursuits that directly related to his growing interest in social justice and activism, and the role of the church in civil society. On March 15, 1965, along with other Harvard students, he boarded a chartered bus from Boston bound for Selma, Alabama, to support Martin Luther King, Jr. and other activists in the protest march for black voting rights to the state Capitol in Montgomery.⁴²

Branson had struggled with the decision whether or not to go to Selma,⁴³ after reading editorials in the *Review and Herald* that urged Adventists not to engage in collective action.⁴⁴ But he decided to go and the experience was seminal, informing lifelong beliefs about the importance of activism and advocacy. In Selma, Branson, along with his Harvard classmates, was given training in nonviolent protesting techniques and assigned to be a marshal, wearing a yellow armband and helping to keep order and protect the marchers.⁴⁵

A few months after the Selma march, when the Watts riots broke out in Los Angeles, Branson was already in the city, directing a project that brought Adventist high school and college students together with underprivileged youth in east Los Angeles, tutoring and organizing youth clubs and field trips during their summer vacation.⁴⁶

The Founding of the Association of Adventist Forums and Spectrum (1967-1969)

The extreme national unrest of the 1960s contributed to Branson's intense interest in the role of the Adventist church in society. Serious conversations with other Adventist graduate students and young professionals in Boston had grown into a regular, organized discussion group by 1963.⁴⁷ Soon up to a hundred young Adventists were meeting monthly in the elegant Braun Room at the Harvard Divinity School, arranged by Roy.⁴⁸ Members of this group found like-minded young people in other cities, and other discussion groups sprang up. Branson and his friends decided that it might be time for a more formal network, which could publish an independent journal — Roy's long-held dream.

In the autumn of 1967, after discussions with and an endorsement from Neal C. Wilson, General Conference vice president for the North American Division,⁴⁹ the graduate students and scholars named themselves the Association of Adventist Forums, drafted a constitution and bylaws, chose officers, and formalized their purpose of providing "a Forum in which thoughtful persons of Seventh-day Adventist orientation will be encouraged to examine and discuss freely issues and ideas relevant to the church in all its aspects and to its members as Christians in society."⁵⁰

Alvin Kwiram, who taught chemistry at Harvard University, was named president of the new association, and Branson the executive secretary. Molleurus Couperus, a physician and professor at the Loma Linda University School of Medicine, was to edit the new quarterly journal called *Spectrum* — a name suggested by Ardice Branson.⁵¹ Contributors and consulting editors were from Adventist and non-Adventist universities from across

the United States and abroad, as well as a representative from the General Conference.⁵² Notices about the new association appeared in the regional church papers, soliciting membership among Adventist graduate students and scholars.⁵³

In two years, the Association of Adventist Forums had 15 regional chapters and members had attended 13 regional retreats. The first issue of *Spectrum* was published in the winter of 1969, and within a year had more than 1,000 subscribers.⁵⁴ In an article for the *Review* describing the new association, Branson stated that its primary goal was to “continue producing a journal that will encourage communication among the highly educated within the church, thereby expanding the scope of our message, a journal that will ensure a constant crosscurrent of ideas, drawing potential leaders toward, not away from, the denomination. If *Spectrum* can encourage a climate in which members respect scholarship and thoughtful discussion — strong safeguards against indifference and apostasy — it will have helped to support the Adventist Movement as an effective instrument of God.”⁵⁵

Ethics Professor at Andrews University and Social Justice Work (1967-1975)

In the autumn of 1967, during the exciting time of starting the new organization and journal, as Branson was still finishing his doctorate at Harvard, he accepted appointment as assistant professor of Christian ethics at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.⁵⁶

Branson taught small classes that were known as difficult and intense. As a result, the students he taught were well prepared for graduate work in religious studies and theology at leading universities in the United States. Branson’s students went on to earn degrees from Yale University, University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University, Claremont Graduate University, Princeton University and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley.⁵⁷

Though Branson was very comfortable in an academic setting, he did not confine himself to the classroom. He was committed to activism and practical work that made a tangible difference in society. Every summer, he took students to work in poor city neighborhoods around the country. In the summer of 1968, Roy shepherded about a dozen seminary students to Washington, D.C., for a field school program where they learned practical skills as they worked mainly with young people for 10 weeks in disadvantaged areas of the inner city. In an article for the *Review*, Roy laid out the thinking behind the seminary field school, calling it “disinterested benevolence.” He wrote: “We were there because people needed us, and because we wanted to learn how to help others who needed us. We were not there because the Adventist Church had decided that it would reap a specific number of baptisms from our efforts.”⁵⁸

In 1969, Branson led a group of seminary students to Harlem in New York City, where they helped with summer programs for teenagers, and more.⁵⁹ In the summer of 1970, he went to Jacksonville, Florida,⁶⁰ where the

seminary wanted him to work with a more traditional evangelistic campaign. In Florida, Roy met Viveca Black, a college student and returning student missionary 11 years his junior, and the two spent time getting to know each other.⁶¹ Branson spent the next summer with a group of Andrews students working on community service projects and conducting a summer camp for underprivileged children in Jackson, Mississippi.⁶²

In 1971-1972, Branson also took a turn as president of the Association of Adventist Forums, and initiated a number of projects under the umbrella of Forum, including publishing a newsletter, and running a summer inner city tutoring and recreation program in Orlando, Florida.⁶³ His summer project in 1972 took him to Plymouth, England, where he organized a stop-smoking clinic before a seminary evangelism campaign was held.⁶⁴ He again traveled overseas in the summer of 1974, this time to Nigeria, where he directed and taught at an Andrews extension school at the Adventist College of West Africa.⁶⁵

During this time when Branson was working directly for the Seventh-day Adventist Church at its flagship seminary, he was also active on several General Conference committees: a Youth Challenge Committee in 1967;⁶⁶ a Standing Committee on Concern for Inner Cities in 1968;⁶⁷ a committee to study the subject of Seventh-day Adventists and military service in 1970;⁶⁸ and a committee studying the theology of the Church's relationship to civil government in 1971.⁶⁹

Kennedy Institute Scholar

In 1974 Branson was named a visiting scholar at the new Kennedy Institute's Center for Bioethics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where he could study topics in ethics he was drawn to, including a patient's right to know, the ethics of healthcare delivery and experimentation using prisoners as subjects.⁷⁰ In 1976 he co-edited an anthology, *Ethics and Health Policy*, which gathered the most important research relating ethical theory to health policy.⁷¹ He was part of a historic trip to China in 1979 with other delegates from the Kennedy Institute, not long after the end of China's violent Cultural Revolution, meeting the Chinese vice premier in Beijing.⁷²

Branson was an early academic in the burgeoning field of bioethics, and he retained his relationship with the Kennedy Institute for many years as research scholar and fellow, attending conferences, publishing articles in academic journals and preparing testimony for Congress.⁷³

In 1975, Branson was granted leave from his teaching position at Andrews and left the seminary permanently the following academic year,⁷⁴ moving to Washington, D.C. That October, he married Viveca Black in a ceremony attended only by their mothers in Florence, Italy. The marriage was to last only a few years before they separated, and Roy and Viveca were legally divorced in 1992.

Spectrum Editor (1975-1998)

During its first six years *Spectrum*, the quarterly journal of the Association of Adventist Forums, had generated a great deal of controversy, especially with its coverage of founding Adventist Ellen G. White.⁷⁵ There were clashes with church leaders.⁷⁶ When editor Molleurus Couperus was ready to step down, the Association's leadership decided to replace him with a Board of Editors, to diffuse any criticism. Roy Branson and Charles Scriven, a young pastor and former *Insight* editor, agreed to do the actual work of editing the journal, while Alvin Kwiram would act as editorial board president.⁷⁷ The first issue under the new co-editors was published in spring 1975, and in it the new editors promised to continue to cover difficult issues, including women in the church and the question of divorce. *Spectrum* would still aim for the highest academic standards but would “be less a scholarly periodical and more a journal of thought, opinion and creative expression.”⁷⁸ When Scriven left to pursue a doctoral degree at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in 1977,⁷⁹ Roy Branson became sole editor of *Spectrum*, a position he held for two decades.

Branson's skills as a listener and a networker, his insatiable consumption of knowledge, plus his inclination to confront controversy smilingly head-on, were attributes that gave him success as editor of an independent Adventist publication that saw looking at the church with unblinking candor as its mission. Under his editorship, *Spectrum* covered stories about the church – lawsuits, financial scandals, a theological debate over the sanctuary doctrine, the previously forgotten minutes of the 1919 Bible conference, the story of the gay community within the Adventist church, proposals for change in church structure – with the careful thoroughness of academia and investigative journalism unavailable elsewhere.

Not everyone was pleased by *Spectrum's* efforts. Early on, many people identified *Spectrum* with critique and complaint, and some thought the journal's exploration of issues at times undermined long-held beliefs. On occasion church leaders were unhappy about certain stories (a review of Ronald Numbers' book about Ellen White caused particular furor).⁸⁰ Though Branson worked to maintain ties with leaders of the institutional church, he continued to publish articles about topics he believed needed to be discussed, recognizing that his position as *Spectrum* editor meant he would not be considered for some denominational posts.⁸¹ He said later: “*Spectrum* established that media not run by church officials could be responsible, helpful, and – some came to believe – essential.”⁸² He was determined that *Spectrum* be a space for Adventist historians, scientists and theologians to contribute analyses and ideas that would help to shape the church.

Roy was principally optimistic, hopeful about the future of the church he was committed to, and he published many positive stories, including an issue focused on the sacredness of laughter,⁸³ and another dedicated to the celebration of the Sabbath,⁸⁴ which he later expanded into a book of essays.⁸⁵ The following year, he edited a book called *Pilgrimage of Hope* about another of his abiding interests: apocalyptic literature.⁸⁶

In the 1990s, Branson used a significant portion of *Spectrum's* space, as well as his own personal influence, to focus attention on the issue of ordaining women to the ministry in the Adventist church. After attending the 1995 General Conference session in Utrecht, The Netherlands, where the world church denied a North

American Division request to allow it to ordain women,⁸⁷ Branson spoke to the Sabbath School class he taught at Sligo Church in Takoma Park, urging that, in view of the convictions widely-shared in the congregation, Sligo ordain its female pastors. Just a few weeks later, church members voted overwhelming support, and on September 23, 1995, Sligo Church held a service to ordain three women to the ministry, although at the time their ordination was not recognized by the conference, union, or General Conference.⁸⁸ This historic event was widely discussed at all levels of the church structure, and even covered by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.⁸⁹ In a special issue, *Spectrum* published transcripts of the debates at Sligo and documents that led to the decision.⁹⁰

During the majority of years it was edited by Branson, *Spectrum* was headquartered in a few rooms on the second floor of the office building owned by the Sligo Church and survived on a tight budget.⁹¹

Public Advocacy and Education

Branson was not content to just sit behind a desk. While editing the quarterly journal, he also worked on public policy and social justice projects. From its beginning in 1985, Roy was involved with the Washington Institute,⁹² an organization set up to reach and influence Washington thought leaders,⁹³ and served as its director from 1993 to 1998. The Washington Institute began to focus its attention on campaigning for tobacco-control legislation,⁹⁴ and in 1993 Branson formed and served as co-chair of the Interreligious Coalition on Smoking or Health, a lobbying consortium with 15 (and later more) different religious denominations as members, to convince Congress to raise the tax on tobacco. He helped to organize conferences and published articles calling on all Adventists to be activists and write letters to their congressional representatives and to President Bill Clinton in opposing the tobacco industry.⁹⁵

In 1994, Branson also returned to his academic roots and began team-teaching a class in Christian Ethics at Columbia Union College (now Washington Adventist University),⁹⁶ whose campus stood right next to Sligo Church and the *Spectrum* office. In his teaching, he once again used the challenging seminar format he had used at Andrews. He required his students to read a book and write a paper every week, and classes were the setting for intense discussions.⁹⁷

Branson was considerably shaken when he suffered two heart attacks in 1997 and 1998 – he was already older than his father had been when Ernest died of a heart attack. Roy started paying close attention to his health and began walking three miles every day without fail.

Columbia Union College and the Center for Law and Public Policy (1998-2008)

In 1998, Branson stepped down as editor of *Spectrum* after 20 years at the helm and took a position as professor of ethics and public policy at Columbia Union College, where he also established the new Center for Law and Public Policy, a successor to the Washington Institute.⁹⁸ The question of how Adventism can serve the wider world, promoting Revelation's "healing of the nations,"⁹⁹ was always his passion, and he found a place to work for this cause on Capitol Hill, engaging with congressional leaders and campaigning for public health and policy issues.

The Center for Law and Public Policy helped attract Adventist pre-law students to Columbia Union College, and many of them were given a window into advocacy and the workings of government with part-time work at the Center's office in the Methodist Building located between the U.S. Supreme Court and Senate office buildings. Branson also organized the pre-law students into a mock trial team that succeeded against many teams from much larger universities.¹⁰⁰ The Center also became a valuable nexus for Adventists concerned with church and state affairs and a resource utilized by the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department of both the Columbia Union and the General Conference. As with a number of initiatives associated with Branson, it had an outsize influence in comparison to the resources invested, and this owed much to his personal investment.

Loma Linda University (2008-2015)

In 2008, at the age of 70, Branson was hired as associate dean in the School of Religion at Loma Linda University. He soon assumed the leadership of Loma Linda's Center for Christian Bioethics, a natural fit with his background in bioethics.

The move to Loma Linda was a logical continuation of Roy's dedication to theology, advocacy, and ethics, and he pushed his colleagues in the School of Religion faculty to elevate the use of scripture and to remember the importance of moral advocacy to the task of religion within society. He started a "Heroes in Health Care" course and an "Ethics in Great Films" series.¹⁰¹ Branson said he felt that his overarching task at Loma Linda was to convince the institution "to expand its self-understanding from 'treating the whole person,' that presupposes a medical treatment setting, to 'healing the nations,' (Revelation 22:2), that presupposes a transformation of *society*, which I think is more biblical and Adventist."¹⁰² He also helped to start another Sabbath School class at Loma Linda, similar to the one he founded at Sligo Church, where difficult topics were openly discussed from every angle.¹⁰³

Roy Branson died unexpectedly from complications of cardiovascular disease on July 7, 2015, at the age of 77. He was buried July 20 in Montecito Memorial Park, where his father, mother, brother and grandfather are interred.¹⁰⁴

Contribution

Branson remained a fervent activist all his life for the causes he believed in, including racial and gender equality, ethical healthcare, anti-smoking legislation, opportunity for the disadvantaged, and an independent press. He was a champion of students and influenced generations of young Adventist scholars to pursue graduate training and to work for social justice. While perceived by some as being unnecessarily controversial and divisive — and often unorthodox — he was a dedicated Seventh-day Adventist with a vision for the church, and a theology that focused on celebration and hope.

Few Seventh-day Adventists have doctorates from Ivy League universities — even fewer have then gone on to dedicate their careers to Adventist education, through both institutions and independent media. Branson was a major figure on the Adventist theological landscape for 40 years, and exemplified important trajectories in late twentieth-century North American Adventism. His influence continues to be felt.

Branson was best known for his powerful role in shaping Adventist intellectual life and for his call for Adventists to reclaim their heritage as people who care about addressing issues of social injustice and public health.¹⁰⁵

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