

Oyen, Adolph Bernard (1857- 1940)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

A. B. Oyen's service with the Seventh-day Adventist church lasted only about 13 years but it took a wide variety of forms including editor, college teacher, publishing house manager, and secretary of the General Conference.

Editor, Teacher, GC Secretary

Adolph Bernard Oyen was born in Trondhjem (now Trondheim), Norway, April 15, 1857. His parents, Frederick and Inger Anna (Hofstad) Oyen, left Norway and immigrated to Chicago in 1861 when Adolph was just four years old. They had four children: Fred, Adolph, Henry and Anna.¹

Adolph graduated from Carpenter School (public) in Chicago in 1870 and attended Chicago High School for two years. He later became an Adventist and moved to Battle Creek, Michigan,² where he was employed at the Review and Herald Publishing House from 1874 to 1876 as an apprentice, printer, proofreader, and editor. Also, though only 17 years old, he was hired to teach Danish at Battle Creek College when it opened in December 1874 and thus was listed as a member of the school's first faculty.³ Adolph married Jennie Ann Sprague (1847-1911), who also taught at the Battle Creek school, on August 2, 1877.⁴ The couple had two children: Albert Nelson Oyen (1878-1942) and Winifred Jane Oyen Holmes (1880-1969).



A. B. Oyen

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

In 1881, at the age of 24, Professor A. B. Oyen, as he was called, was elected the sixth secretary of the General Conference. He served two one-year terms from December 1, 1881 to November 8, 1883. He also served as one of three editors of the *Youth's Instructor* throughout 1883.⁵ He was ordained to gospel ministry along with W. C. White, Ellen White's son, on November 20, 1883 during the last meeting of the General Conference. Following remarks by Mrs. White, George I. Butler and S. N. Haskell led out in the service of ordination.⁶

Oyen was also asked to complete a translation of *The Life of Christ* by Ellen White (a preliminary European version of *Desire of Ages*) begun by J. G. Matteson, the leading Scandinavian evangelist and the first Adventist missionary to Scandinavia. Plans were laid for Oyen to go to Norway, complete the translation, and help build up the church's publishing work in Scandinavia. Disputes with Matteson over the translation and concern about Jennie's health almost resulted in Oyen abandoning the project entirely, but church leaders assured him that his expertise was essential to the success of the Adventist mission in Europe and convinced him to proceed.⁷

The Scandinavian Publishing House

The Oyen family along with E. G. Olsen departed for Norway on April 22, 1884.⁸ Despite their earlier conflict, Matteson wrote that Oyen was a great benefit to him and to the work in Scandinavia.

Eld. Oyen has taken the management of the printing work, and thus I have been enabled to labor more extensively in the mission. His experience as a printer and editor has been very valuable in connection with our publishing work, and his labors as preacher and elder in the Christiania church have been a great benefit to this church.⁹

The activities at the publishing house, Den Skandinaviske Forlags-og Trykkeriforening (The Scandinavian Publishing and Printing Association), later named Norsk Bokforlag (Norwegian Publishing House), were extensive. In addition to the tracts and booklets, it issued two periodicals: *Tidernes Tegn* (*Signs of the Times*) begun in 1879 and *Sundhedsbladet*, a health magazine started in 1881.

A brief history of the publishing house prepared in conjunction with its 100th anniversary in 1979 describes Oyen's contribution to its early development:

With a steady hand he conducted the affairs and handled the financial circumstances in a reassuring way. He could be strict and just, but these features were always blended with the deepest Christian tenderness and fatherly care, specially toward the colporteurs, that often faced hard times.¹⁰

During her two years of ministry in Europe (1885-1887), Ellen White and her son W. C. White, after their arrival in Christiania (Oslo), Norway, on October 30, 1885, enjoyed a visit with the Oyens at their home, located in a pleasant location in the suburbs of the city. In her diary, Ellen White noted that she and her son enjoyed the opportunity to talk freely in English again, commenting that "we are again in America, as it were!"¹¹

A. B. Oyen then served as translator for Ellen White during her public addresses and sermons in Norway. Her largest public audience, about 1800, was for a temperance address delivered in a gymnasium. "I spoke for one hour and twenty minutes, Brother Oyen acting as my interpreter," she wrote. "The people listened with deep interest."¹² On another occasion she wrote: "I spoke upon Christ's riding into Jerusalem, and Brother Oyen translated just as fast as I gave him, sentence by sentence."¹³

Counsel From Ellen White

Ellen White wrote several letters of counsel to both Jennie and Adolph Oyen. Jennie had difficulty exercising faith in God, in part because of health problems that made it difficult for her to have a sense of hope and assurance. Mrs. White gave a public "testimony of encouragement for Sister Oyen" at the Third European Missionary Council held in Basel, Switzerland, late in September 1885:

In looking to herself, she [Jennie Oyen] would find nothing to inspire her with faith. She must come to Jesus with her imperfections, believing that He alone would remove these defects. Christ alone could remove from her the stain of sin and blot out her transgressions and give her His righteousness."¹⁴

At a meeting the next day "many precious testimonies" were given, Ellen White wrote. "Sister Oyen spoke more hopefully," acknowledging "that her unhappiness for these years had been because she had not exercised faith," and stating that she "was now determined to commit herself fully to Jesus Christ." At the same meeting:

Brother Oyen bore an excellent testimony that he had felt he was too unworthy to have any part in the work of God and he had better return to America; but he had received much light and believed it was the purpose of God that they should come to Europe to save his soul and his wife's soul, and he believed the Lord would work for them if they did the best they could.¹⁵

Jennie continued to struggle with doubt and poor health. Ellen White addressed these issues in a letter sent June 9, 1887, after the Oyens had returned to Battle Creek:

It is easy, my dear sister, for you to float down the stream, talk your doubts and your unbelief, but to resist the current and reach the fountain requires continual persevering effort. While God grants you your reasoning powers, subdue yourself through the grace given you of God, keep pride of dress under control, keep unbelief apart from your life, for unbelief has been cherished until it has become a part of your abiding character. . . .

You have nausea, headache, languor. Well, my sister, regulate your diet; and then after you have done all you can do, believe that the Lord will help you. . . . [I]f you would come into the path of humble obedience, you may be transformed by the grace of God; but if you pursue your own way in the acquired habit of unbelief, then you will be unhappy.¹⁶

In a letter to Adolph on July 23, 1886, Ellen White warned both him and Jennie about close association with a young woman named Cecilia, whom both regarded as a valuable help:

I have felt much troubled in regard to the matter of Cecelia's going to America with you and your wife. I know that your wife is much attached to Cecelia and that you think much of her, and I am troubled over this matter. I know that the appearance is not as it should be, your work brings you in close companionship, and there are dangers in this close relationship in your work that neither of you discern. . . .

It is now that you want to show yourself a man. Your wife is a sufferer, and let nothing take place which will increase her sufferings. Treat her tenderly. . . . She has sown doubt and as the sure result will harvest that which she has sown. She loves you and has confidence in you. Do nothing that shall give her the least cause to think that you do not love her. But as you value your soul, keep yourself free from the charms of every girl or woman.¹⁷

When she learned that, despite her counsel, Cecilia was assisting Oyen in his work at the Review and Herald, Ellen White wrote him again on May 31, 1887.

I have been laboring for months to break up this ensnaring wile of Satan, this undue attachment between married men and young girls, and I see more and more the power of the enemy to weaken moral power and lead on, almost unconsciously at first, until the barriers are broken down. I cannot sanction this arrangement. I cannot see that God is in it. . . .

The Lord has a work for you to do. Be wholly on the Lord's side, and have no association with those who would entangle your soul in doubts and questionings, because you are weak in this direction and need to fight constantly the fight of faith. War the good warfare, lay hold on eternal life.¹⁸

Return to America and Departure From Adventism

Oyen returned to his previous position in the Review and Herald publishing office upon returning to Battle Creek in October 1886.¹⁹ On November 18, at the 25th annual session of the General Conference, following reports by M. C. Wilcox and B. L. Whitney about other parts of the European field, Oyen gave an encouraging presentation on the progress of the church's work in Scandinavia. "All hearts were moved by their stirring and impressive words," according to the *Review*.²⁰

Oyen was elected to serve as vice president of the International Sabbath School Association on November 27, and on January 12, 1887, was named secretary of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association Board of Trustees.²¹ The dates of the Ellen White letters cited above suggest that he continued with his various responsibilities in Battle Creek at least until June 1887. Denominational sources make no subsequent mention of A. B. Oyen.

In his book *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*, published 1889, Dudley M. Canright included Oyen among 21 “prominent persons” who had left the church, mostly “on account of Mrs. White’s visions,” he claimed. Canright, formerly a leading Adventist evangelist who left the denomination in February 1887, wrote: “Elder A. B. Oyen, missionary to Europe, and editor of their Danish paper, has renounced the faith. Living right at the head of the work for many years, he had the best of opportunity to know all about its workings.”²²

Oyen graduated from the Detroit College of Medicine in 1890 and practiced as a physician for a year in Detroit. In 1891 he opened a medical office in his home at 2816 Logan Boulevard in Chicago. He became a member of the American Medical Association, the Physicians’ Fellowship Club, and the Scandinavian-American Medical Society of Chicago. During World War I he served as chief medical examiner for Local Draft Board No. 66 in Chicago.

Jennie Ann Sprague Oyen died October 29, 1911, in Chicago. Two years later, on January 15, 1914, Dr. Oyen married 26-year-old May V. Johnson who had worked for 12 years as a housekeeper in the Oyen home.²³ The doctor and his new wife had one daughter, Shirley May Oyen. Dr. Oyen died of a cerebral hemorrhage in his home in Chicago on March 24, 1940 at age 82.²⁴

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NOTES

1. United States Census 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 data at "Adolph B. Oyen," *FamilySearch*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/GQQ1-66C>.
2. "Oyen, Adolph Bernard," in *The Book of Chicagoans: A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Living Men of the City of Chicago*, ed. John L. Leonard (Chicago: Marquis, 1905), 444; *Chicago*, III; Rolf H. Erickson and Nils William Olsson, "Scandinavian Physicians in Chicago 1887-1912," *Swedish American Genealogist* 6, no. 1 (1986): 9-10.
3. Mary Alicia Steward, "The Beginnings of Our School Work," *ARH*, September 18, 1924, 31.
4. "Thoughts Turn to Old Classmates At the New Battle Creek College," *Battle Creek Enquirer*, September 7, 1924, 3.
5. George W. Amadon, "A Sketch of the Editorship of the Youth's Instructor," *Youth's Instructor*, August 7, 1902, 250.
6. "General Conference Proceedings: Twenty Second Annual Session," *ARH*, November 20, 1883, 733; Geo. I. Butler, "The Late General Conference," *ARH*, November 27, 1883, 742, 746.
7. Denis Kaiser, "Ellen G. White's Life of Christ: An Episode in the History of Early Adventist Translation Work" (2012), *Faculty Publications*. Paper 26, 136-137, accessed January 17, 2022, <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/church-history-pubs/26>.

8. "Our Scandinavian Mission," *Home Missionary*, October 1890, 222.
9. Ibid.; J.G. Matteson, "The Scandinavian Mission," in *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Basle: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 72; Butler, "The Late General Conference," 744.
10. The author is grateful and indebted to Terje Johannessen of Norway for his translation of the Norwegian Publishing House centennial booklet and his input into this article.
11. Ellen G. White, "Excerpts From the E. G. White Diary," *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 2, 116, Ellen G. White Writings, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/73/info>.
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20. "The Conference" and "General Conference Proceedings, Twenty-fifth Annual Session," *ARH*, November 23, 1886, 728.
21. "General S.S. Association Proceedings," *ARH*, January 18, 1887, 46; "Organization of the Publishing Board," *ARH*, January 18, 1887, 48.
22. D.M. Canright, *Seventh-Day Adventism Renounced* (New York and Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1889), 62.
23. "Physician Rewards Faithful Servant By Marrying Her," *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, January 16, 1914, 5.

24. "Dr. Adolph Bernard Oyen obituary," *Chicago Tribune*, March 25, 1940, 10.

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