

McArthur, Benjamin Gerald (1951–2017)

EMILY C. MCARTHUR

Emily C. McArthur teaches at the Baylor School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the United States. She earned a B.A. from Southern Adventist University and a Ph.D. in Victorian Literature from the University of California, Riverside.

Historian and university administrator Benjamin Gerald McArthur was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on February 12, 1951. He was the sixth and final child born to Ruby Shafer McArthur and John McArthur, a Nebraska attorney. McArthur spent his childhood in Lincoln, attending Helen Hyatt Elementary School and College View Academy. He also spent a year boarding at Enterprise Academy in Enterprise, Kansas. On November 23, 1963, McArthur was baptized by Murray Deming at the College View Seventh-day Adventist Church.

After earning a bachelor's degree in history at Andrews University, McArthur went on to graduate work at the University of Chicago, where he completed a doctorate in American cultural history under the direction of Neil Harris.

Teaching and Administration

In 1979, McArthur took an academic appointment in the history department of Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University) in Collegedale, Tennessee. There he met nursing faculty member Callie Thatcher, an alumna of Southern, the University of Mississippi, and Emory University. The two were married near Collegedale on August 10, 1980. Their union produced two children: Emily, born 1983, and Mills, born 1990.



Benjamin McArthur.

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

McArthur continued his work in Adventist higher education for nearly four decades, primarily at Southern Adventist University, where he won awards for his teaching and research. As co-founder and director of the Southern Scholars honors program, two-time chair of the faculty senate, and long-time history department chair, he promoted his vision for a rigorous Christian liberal arts education. A champion of interdisciplinary thought, McArthur attended conferences of the Adventist English Association and the Society of Adventist Philosophers, in addition to his active participation in the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians. In the same spirit, he crafted an Introduction to Philosophy course and a Western Intellectual Tradition minor under the auspices of Southern's History Department.

Twice, McArthur left Southern to serve at other Adventist institutions. In 1998, he was the first visiting historian invited to Pacific Union College for the Walter C. Utt Endowed Chair. From 2009 until 2012, he served as the Vice President for Academic Administration at Southwestern Adventist University. To conclude his career, he returned to the Southern Adventist University history department. McArthur retired in March 2017 and died April 10, 2017, after a year-long battle with cancer. Southern Adventist University awarded him a posthumous Distinguished Service Medallion during its May 2017 commencement exercises.¹

Research and Writing

Aside from his institutional duties, McArthur researched the American theatre, Christian education, the Great Books movement, and church history. He authored three books. *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* was based on his doctoral. He later penned two biographies: *The Man who was Rip Van Winkle: Joseph Jefferson and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre*, and *A.G. Daniells: Shaper of Twentieth-Century Adventism*, part of the Adventist Pioneers series from Pacific Press. McArthur also wrote for such journals as *American Heritage*, *First Things*, *Academic Questions*, *Spectrum*, *The History Teacher*, and *Reviews in American History*. Southern's History Department posthumously distributed a final letter from McArthur to his students, encouraging each to "continue to read" and to "nurture [their] relationship with God." The letter was later published in the *Adventist Review*.²

McArthur's work manifested his certainty that Adventism could be compatible with rigorous intellectual inquiry. His denominational work—teaching, administrating, investigating church history—brought the lessons of history to the Adventist present. Lisa Clark Diller, a colleague in the Southern History Department, writes that his "commitment to the Adventist church as a public intellectual, writing and participating in the issues that our church in North America faces, was also a reminder to us as his colleagues that what we do here at Southern is part of a bigger endeavor than just getting our students through a curriculum."³

Beyond his footprint in Adventism, McArthur engaged with the evangelical world and with secular academia, championing Adventist institutions,⁴ examining the cultural environs of Ellen White,⁵ and publishing with respected journals and academic presses. McArthur's institutional legacy, alongside his rich and ranging

scholarship, encouraged a historian's approach—balanced, thoughtful, and well-informed—to issues in education and the church.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Southern Adventist University, "Events of Commencement" Program, May 5-7, 2017.
2. Marcos Paseggi, "Adventist Professor Inspires His Students Just Before Passing Away," *ARH*, April 17, 2017. [news/story4996-adventist-professor-inspires-his-students-just-before-passing-away](https://www.arh.org/news/story4996-adventist-professor-inspires-his-students-just-before-passing-away).
3. Lisa Clark Diller, "People News: Ben McArthur," *ASDAH: Association of Adventist Historians*, accessed 8 October, 2018, <http://www.sdahistorians.org/people-news.html>.
4. Benjamin McArthur, "A Protestant Shtetl," *First Things*, December 1991, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1991/12/a-protestant-shtetl>.

5. Benjamin McArthur, "Culture," in *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, ed. Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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