McCullagh, John Stephen (1863–1951)

ROSS GOLDSTONE

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John Stephen McCullagh was an Australian Adventist minister, evangelist, and church administrator. In his early years of ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia and New Zealand, Stephen McCullagh worked closely with Ellen White and made a significant contribution to the development and advancement of the denomination. Later, McCullagh demonstrated a penchant for changing theological viewpoints and denominational membership and left the Seventh-day Adventist ministry.

Family Background

John Stephen McCullagh was the son of Samuel (1828-1906) and Matilda (1832-1895) McCullagh of Willunga, South Australia. McCullagh was known as Stephen McCullagh among Seventh-day Adventists. His parents, Samuel and Matilda McCullagh, with their eldest son, Joseph, emigrated from Liverpool on board the *Admiral Boxer*, arriving in Australia on August 21, 1855. They had ten children born between 1854 and 1874, all raised as Roman Catholic. Born on December 24, 1863, Stephen McCullagh married Hannah Jackson (died 1939) on April 10, 1882. The McCullaghs’ daughter, Chrystabel Harriet, was born on June 3, 1884, and married Oswald G. H.
Sinfield in 1907 at Ashfield, NSW. She died on December 15, 1919 and is buried in the Glen Innes, New South Wales cemetery.

Conversion to the Seventh-day Adventist Church

In 1886 Pastor J.O. Corliss sailed from Melbourne to Adelaide with the intent of conducting an evangelistic campaign in that city. He hired the Norwood Town Hall for five weeks and then continued the meetings in the mission tent which had been freighted from Melbourne. On November 27, 1886, as a result of these meetings, Corliss was successful in forming the first Adventist church in Adelaide. Stephen McCullagh and his mother, Matilda “Nettie” McCullagh were among those who signed the covenant and were baptized there.

Early Ministry

Stephen McCullagh became actively involved in holding Bible studies in Norwood and North Adelaide throughout 1887. His work generated much interest and Sunday night meetings were organized with McCullagh as the preacher.

When the Australian Conference was organized in Melbourne in October 1888, Stephen McCullagh was one of the Adelaide delegates and appointed as secretary. He served in this position until transferred to New Zealand in 1891. In the years 1888-1890, McCullagh conducted successful evangelistic campaigns in the suburbs of Bendigo and Portlington in Victoria. He also wrote spiritual articles which were published in the *Bible Echo*. At the Australian Conference Session of October 1890, it was recommended that “Brn W. L. H. Baker, S. McCullagh, and D. Steed be ordained to the work of the gospel ministry and receive credentials.” The ordination service was conducted by Stephen Haskell on the evening of the close of the Conference.

New Zealand (1891-1893)

The McCullagh family sailed from Melbourne on December 23, 1890, and arrived in Wellington, New Zealand in early January 1891 where Stephen McCullagh commenced pastoral and evangelistic work in New Zealand’s capital. Initially, it was planned that he and Pastor Israel would run a major tent campaign in the city, but the Wellington winds made this impossible. McCullagh ran a short campaign in Palmerston North, strengthening the spiritual commitment of the members in that city. He also visited the church in Napier. It was while in Palmerston North that he was alerted to interests developing as a result of literature sales in Kaikoura on the South Island. He journeyed to this coastal town and spent five months holding meetings throughout the district. In the presence of Pastor Gates, he was able to baptize the Paap family and others, including his own eight-year-old daughter Chrystabel. The Paap family later moved to Australia and gave many years of dedicated service to the furtherance of the gospel in New Zealand, Australia and overseas.
At the March 1993 Napier camp meeting, the McCullaghs had their first contact with Ellen White. It was here that both Stephen McCullagh and Ellen White spoke strongly against phrenology—a topic of some debate at that time. Following the camp-meeting, Stephen McCullagh was appointed to Ormondville, a rural community between Hastings and Palmerston North on the North Island. He was a gripping speaker and aroused a strong interest in that village and surrounding ethnic communities; an interest that resulted in strong and sometimes vitriolic opposition. Despite the opposition, he established a strong company of believers who enthusiastically supported the building of a church which was dedicated, debt free, by Ellen White on November 19, 1893. A strong relationship developed between McCullagh and Ellen White as a result of their shared responsibilities in New Zealand. In his letters he would sometimes address her as “Dear Mother.”

However, all was not well in the McCullagh household during 1893. Diphtheria swept through the family, with Chrystabel facing the possibility of death. Stephen McCullagh wrote a letter to Ellen White requesting that she and the church members pray for their daughter’s healing. On receiving the letter, problems in the McCullagh home were revealed to Ellen White during the night hours. The family’s recurring bouts of illness were the result of not following Adventist health principles. The pattern of illness in McCullagh’s personal life continued for many years, all attributable, according to Mrs White, to problems in his home. Apart from dietary problems, the parents failed to discipline their daughter. Hannah McCullagh was guilty of feeding her husband’s mind with negative thoughts, affecting his personal spirituality. Ellen White wrote a lengthy letter outlining what had been revealed to her and the dire consequences for them if changes were not made. Using discretion, she did not give them the letter until some years later, but sent a shorter letter of encouragement and counsel.

Some weeks later, Ellen White stayed in the McCullaghs’ home at Ormondville at a time when McCullagh was suffering from throat strain, impeding his voice production when speaking in public. Mrs. White diagnosed the cause as faulty breathing and encouraged the evangelist to breathe from the diaphragm when preaching. She also took the opportunity to preach a public sermon on child training, hoping that the message would impact the McCullaghs.

At the Wellington camp meeting in November-December 1893, McCullagh was voted a member of the New Zealand Conference’s executive committee. Knowing he was to return to Australia at the end of December, he made a farewell visit to the church in Ormonville. He wrote,

While giving a farewell address, the Spirit of the Lord came upon us, and I experienced the healing touch of Jesus of Nazareth to my throat, which had been in a most critical and dangerous condition for nearly three months, and which had defied the strongest remedies. We feel grateful for this, and are led to ask the question, Why do we not appropriate Christ’s healing power, as we do his power to forgive sins?

This question was to have considerable significance given events in McCullagh’s later life.
Return to Australia (1894-1896)

In January 1894, Stephen McCullagh attended the Brighton camp meeting in Australia upon his move from New Zealand. Here he was again appointed secretary of the Australian Conference, the administrative position he held prior to transferring to New Zealand. He was also made president of the Sabbath School Association in collaboration with the newly-ordained A. S. Hickox. His field of labor was the Sydney churches. Apart from his pastoral role, McCullagh quickly gained the public eye when three Seventh-day Adventist laymen were arrested for working on Sundays. After the arrest of the Firth brothers, Stephen McCullagh and Arthur Daniells held high profile public meetings on the subject of religious Liberty. When Robert Shannon, proprietor of Shannon Brick and Tile Works, in Wentworthville, was also arrested on July 29, 1894, for working on Sunday, McCullagh addressed the magistrate on behalf of the accused during the court hearing.

However, the family problems that had emerged in New Zealand intensified in Sydney. In addition, there was considerable discord among the ministers working in the Sydney churches. Under these circumstances, Hannah McCullagh became particularly active in sowing seeds of discord as she visited churches and various members' homes. These issues were addressed by Ellen White at the time of the Ashfield, NSW, camp meeting. Again, McCullagh's health began to deteriorate and he showed signs of suffering from consumption. He was also isolating himself from his colleagues.

As a member of the Australian Conference executive committee, Stephen McCullagh was directly involved in the search for suitable land on which to build a proposed training school. He was a member of the group that evaluated the Brettville Estate on which Avondale College of Higher Education is now located. His consumptive cough alerted Ellen White to his health issues and at a prayer meeting associated with the choice of land, she laid hands on McCullagh and prayed for his healing. His instant return to health was understood by her to be an indication that God's blessing rested on the choice of the Brettville Estate as the site for the school.

Ellen White was living in Sydney at the time and worked closely with McCullagh. She was aware of what was happening in the spiritual lives of the McCullaghs. Aware that he was considering withdrawing from ministry, she visited with them in their home and spoke personally to him about his health issues. She also wrote letters warning against criticism of his fellow ministers. Then, in mid-1895, Stephen McCullagh suffered the loss of his mother who died in Adelaide. At this point there was still a mutually warm relationship between Stephen McCullagh and Ellen White. With special workers' meetings planned for April 1896 at Cooranbong, she issued an invitation for Stephen and Hannah McCullagh to attend the meetings while being accommodated in her Cooranbong home. Because available accommodation was limited, she asked them to make other arrangements for twelve-year old Chrystabel. The McCullaghs attended the meetings, but arranged for alternative accommodation and brought Chrystabel with them.

With deteriorating health throughout 1896, Stephen McCullagh indicated his determination to return to South Australia in spite of Ellen White's counsel not to do so. Instead, she encouraged him to settle his family in the
Cooranbong area and adopt a pastoral role in the New South Wales churches. However, the McCullaghs decided to move to South Australia.

The first South Australia camp meeting was held from October 8-18, 1896. Most of the leaders of the Australian Seventh-day Adventist Church were in attendance, including S. N. Haskell. He ordained Clement Friend Hawkins, a recent convert from the Wesleyan denomination in Victoria. Hawkins’ conversion had created considerable attention as he was a minister in his former church. At the close of the camp meeting, a tent was pitched near the Unley Town Hall and Stephen McCullagh and Clement Friend Hawkins worked together to foster those who showed interest in the message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Apostacy (1897-1899)

McCullagh’s career seemed to be progressing well until March 23, 1897, when suddenly, both McCullagh and Hawkins wrote letters of resignation from the Seventh-day Adventist ministry. They publicly announced their resignation from the Church and proceeded to conduct holiness meetings instead. They advertised these meetings in the *Adelaide Advertiser*. When various leaders, including Daniells, Colcord, Haskell, and Starr, were sent to Adelaide in an endeavor to reclaim the apostates, they were met with calculated resistance and found that these men had secretly been visiting the homes of the Adelaide members and camp meeting interests during which they spread defamatory information against Ellen White. One possible reason for the defection was a reaction against the letter that Ellen White had written in Hastings that had been forwarded to the McCullaghs in July 1896. A second reason may have been the time McCullagh had spent with Fannie Bolton during the Adelaide Camp, listening to her claims that Ellen White was a plagiarist. According to Ellen White, McCullagh defamed her more than even D. M. Canright. Both McCullagh and Hawkins accepted ministerial appointments to Baptist churches within South Australia–McCullagh in Kapunda and Hawkins in Mannum.

Restored to Ministry

In 1899, McCullagh had a change of heart. Making a written apology to Ellen White, he asked to be restored to church fellowship. At meetings held in Cooranbong in July 1899, he was rebaptized in Dora Creek and that same day, at his request, taken out to the Village Church and re-ordained to the ministry. Chrystabel was enrolled as a boarding student in the Training School at Avondale following her parents’ appointment to Ballarat, but was expelled a few weeks later. For some two years, McCullagh ministered in the Victorian Conference, largely at Ballarat and Bendigo. When Ellen White returned to America in 1900, an autographed book was given to her. Two of the signatories were Stephen and Hannah McCullagh. In his message, McCullagh freely admitted to having been a prodigal—something that he again became in 1902 when he resigned a second time from the ministry and Adventism.
Alexander Dowie, Stephen McCullagh, Clement Hawkins and the Zion City Movement

John Alexander Dowie, having immigrated to America from Australia, established his own denomination which he named the Christian Catholic Church of Zion. He rejected all other denominations and emphasized healing by faith alone, denouncing all medical practitioners, hospitals, and accepted forms of treating medical issues. As his influence spread around the world, he sent Wilbur Voliva to be the overseer of his movement in Australia.

In 1902, having once again resigned from the Seventh-day Adventist church, Stephen McCullagh attended Wilbur Voliva’s meetings and affiliated himself with the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church of Zion. He was ordained as “Deacon McCullagh” and given oversight of the church in Sydney. He was quickly thrust into the public arena. A woman named Emma Elizabeth Johnston died in Ashfield, Sydney, following child birth. As a member of the Christian Catholic Church of Zion, she refused to have professional medical attention had “Parson” and Mrs. McCullagh called to pray for her healing. At the coroner’s inquest, John Stephen McCullagh affirmed that he was a minister of the gospel in the Christian Catholic Church and that they had followed the teachings of the church in this case.

In 1904, Alexander Dowie, having adopted the name “Elijah the Restorer,” made a world tour that included meetings in the cities of Auckland, New Zealand, and Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, Australia. In Adelaide, he was joined by his wife who had visited her South Australian parents. Dowie’s meetings in Auckland were peaceful, but due to negative press reports from America, it was anticipated that his Australian meetings could cause unrest. Trouble was anticipated, and when Stephen McCullagh approached the Sydney City authorities for use of the Sydney Town Hall in which to hold services he met with a great deal of reluctance. Permission was given eventually, provided a bond of one hundred pounds was lodged as security against any damage incurred. The city council reserved the right to cancel any further meetings.

On February 16, 1904, as a result of disturbances that occurred during the meeting on the previous night, Wilbur Voliva, Stephen McCullagh, and Dr. Gladstone Dowie, son of the preacher, met with the Inspector-General of Police in New South Wales to seek appropriate police protection at future meetings. Not satisfied with his response, they arranged an appointment with Sir John See, the premier of New South Wales who referred them to the Attorney General. It was apparent the police were reluctant to be involved either inside or outside the meeting place. This may have been due to Dowie’s vitriolic public opposition to the Roman Catholic Church and the Masonic Lodge. When meetings were held on Tuesday night, February 16 and Wednesday night, February 17, there were such strong and orchestrated interruptions and interjections that any future meetings had to be cancelled. Both Stephen McCullagh and Clement Hawkins accompanied Dowie on his tour of Australia, assisting in the public meetings and were ordained in a semi-private ordination ceremony on Tuesday afternoon, March 29, 1904. At his ordination McCullagh was appointed overseer of the New Zealand branch of
the Christian Catholic Church of Zion in New Zealand.38

Meetings followed in Melbourne and Adelaide with the same public response. On arrival at the Spencer Street Railway Station in Melbourne, a crowd of hecklers was waiting to express their anger to the point where Dowie and his associates were physically attacked as they made their way from the station to their waiting transportation in spite of the police presence, which had to resort to force to restore order.39 All of Dowie's meetings in both Melbourne and Adelaide drew huge crowds with up to 10,000 antagonists parading the streets. Eventually, the Adelaide city council withdrew permission for Dowie to continue his meetings in the Town Hall or to use the city baths for a baptismal service.40 Reports of the riotous events that accompanied Dowie's meetings were printed in papers throughout Australia and New Zealand.41 In his Australian meetings, Dowie made repeated appeals for his followers to sell their property and move to Zion City where they could live, work, and worship in an alcohol and tobacco-free environment, refraining from eating pork, oysters, and other health-destroying substances. Zion was to be a city of God-fearing, holy-living citizens.

Towards the end of May 1904, Stephen McCullagh was in Adelaide organizing transportation for a contingent of sixty-three South Australians who were responding to the appeal to move to Zion. The journey involved travelling by train from Adelaide to Melbourne and Sydney before catching a ship, the Manuka, for America.42 McCullagh informed the press that he was leaving for New Zealand in July 1904 where he was to arrange for a group of New Zealanders to go to Zion.

Following Dowie's visit to Australia, Stephen McCullagh relocated to Wellington, New Zealand, to become the overseer of Dowie's church in that country. Published reports indicate that he was successful in baptizing a number of converts by triune immersion, including, on December 31, 1904, his own daughter Chrystabel.43 Towards the end of 1904 or early 1905, he was successful in arranging for a Mr. and Mrs. Wood and family, Mrs. McGregor, and Miss Halpin, all of Wellington, to migrate to Zion City. All of these people had been so impressed by the descriptions of life in Zion they were happy to migrate. However, they all returned to New Zealand in October 1905 and held public meetings warning New Zealanders of the problems to be faced in Zion.44

In 1905, Dowie suffered a severe stroke. Wilbur Voliva was recalled from Australia to take temporary leadership in Zion City. He unearthed details relating Dowie's financial and moral activities, which were made public with the result that John Alexander Dowie was denounced and removed from leadership of the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion.45

News filtered back to McCullagh of the situation in Zion, and, having been converted to the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church of Zion by Voliva, he supported Dowie's demise and proceeded to hold fiery public meetings denouncing the erstwhile leader. Reports of this action were widely reported in various newspapers throughout Australia and New Zealand.46 In June 1906, an article appeared in The Register (Adelaide) under the heading “The Downfall of Dowie” in which both McCullagh and Hawkins are quoted as repudiating not only Dowie but also Voliva. McCullagh is quoted as writing,
Oh, Voliva, my old chief, have you searched your finer sensibilities and deadened your conscience against the heart-cries of men, women, and youth all over the world, who are thrown into despair, and who have already lost their life’s savings, only to make Zion City a refuge of demons to worry and persecute and brow beat the good who have been entrapped there. \(^47\)

Later Years

Stephen McCullagh later became involved in the film industry in Australia and is listed among the Australian cinematographers of the silent period. \(^48\) His daughter died in 1919 and his wife, Hannah, in 1939. In the 1930s, McCullagh lived in Northam, Western Australia. Literature Evangelist Ken Williamson, while canvassing in that town during the years 1947-1948, knocked on McCullagh’s door not knowing who occupied the home. McCullagh showed him an autographed copy of *The Desire of Ages* given to him by Ellen White. At the time of this visit, McCullagh was the pastor of the Elim Four Square Gospel Church and his second wife was an ardent speaker in glossolalia (speaking in tongues). \(^29\) In 1949, Pastor R. H. Abbott was appointed to Northam, and his evangelistic meetings were attended by McCullagh and his wife. Abbott met with the McCullaghs on at least six occasions and had long talks with them. Never once did McCullagh speak negatively of Ellen White. On October 6, 1952, in company with Pastor J. H. Wade, Abbott again visited the home to be told that Stephen McCullagh had died on May 17, 1951, while visiting Fremantle. \(^50\) According to his wife, he was a secret heavy drinker of alcohol who on occasions would consume a bottle of brandy in a night. She did not attend his funeral.\(^51\)

Contribution

In his early years of ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia and New Zealand, Stephen McCullagh made a significant contribution to the development and advancement of the denomination. He was an erudite and persuasive public speaker with an ability to influence civic leaders and magistrates by his logic and forceful presentations. Clearly, he had administrative abilities. Unstable in commitment and disloyal in relationships with fellow workers, he was negatively influenced by his first wife who considered his leadership potential unrecognized or poorly utilized.

McCullagh demonstrated a penchant for changing theological viewpoints and denominational membership seemingly with abandonment and without concern for his negative influence on others, notably Clement Friend Hawkins. However, while McCullagh may have disappointed or disillusioned a number of his converts, his apostasy did not prove detrimental to the well-being of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for the long term.

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


8. “Australian Conference Proceedings,” Bible Echo and the Signs of the Times, February 15, 1890, 60-61


10. Stephen McCullagh, “New Zealand,” Bible Echo and Signs of the Times, June 1, 1891, 1.


28. [Advertisement], *The Adelaide Advertiser*, March 27, 1897, 2.


33. On November 10, 1901, the closing afternoon of the Brunswick, Victoria, camp meeting, Stephen McCullagh preached a sermon titled “The Eastern Question,” (Bible Echo and Signs of the Times, November 25, 1901, 766). An earlier report in the *Bible Echo* (November 18, 1891, 750) indicated he was involved in evangelistic meetings in Berwick following the camp meeting. *Leaves of Healing*, vol. 11, 166, records that John Stephen McCullagh baptized seven people in Sydney on March 24, 1902, into the Christian Catholic Church of Zion. Therefore, sometime late in 1901 or early 1902 he must have resigned from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, moved to Sydney, and accepted leadership in the
Christian Catholic Church of Zion–Dowie's Church. The Victorian Conference has no record of a letter of resignation.


38. “An Ordination Service at ‘Calton Hill,’” *Leaves of Healing*, vol. 15, June 18, 1904, 264; see also [Ordination Picture], *Leaves of Healing*, vol. 15, June 18, 1904, 130, 245.


