

Utt, Walter Charles (1921–1985)

ERIC ANDERSON

Eric Anderson is director of the Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History at Pacific Union College (PUC) in Angwin, California. He taught at PUC for 30 years and stepped in as the college's president in 2017 during a time of transition. Previously, Anderson was president of Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas (2005-2014). Anderson earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of Chicago and has written on Reconstruction in North Carolina, philanthropic support of black education, Progressive Era vice reform, and Adventist history.

Walter Charles Utt, influential Adventist historian, taught for thirty-four years at Pacific Union College (PUC) and chaired the department of history and social studies for all but three of those years.

A teacher remembered for his vivid, witty lectures, he was the denomination's leading scholar of the Huguenots, writing two popular recreations of the ordeal of seventeenth century Protestants as well as

a major academic book, which was published posthumously. He also authored the official history of PUC and numerous articles for church publications on subjects ranging from religious liberty to popular conspiracy theories. As one student remembered, he was appreciated "for his personal warmth, encyclopedic knowledge, effortless brilliance, and irrepressible sense of humor."²

Walter Utt was born August 27, 1921, the eldest of five sons of PUC alumni Charles and Miriam Utt.³ A hemophiliac, his life was shaped by chronic pain. Although he was the son of a college teacher, his ailment meant that his own early education was irregular, consisting mostly of home schooling and wide personal reading. At age 10 he was separated from his family for a year and a half, confined to the hemophilia research ward at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. He experienced sustained formal education for the first time in college (PUC) and at graduate school (University of California, Berkeley). During his teaching career on a hilly campus, he was always dependent on one or two canes, inching his way from class to office to chapel with few accommodations offered for his disability.⁴



Walter C. Utt

Photo courtesy of the artist, S. Wesley Kime, M.D.

He graduated from PUC in 1942 and married Martha Rooks the following year, while he was serving America's war effort as a clerk in the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, California. After the war, he studied history at Berkeley, earning a Ph.D. in 1952, the year after he began his teaching career.

As a teacher in a small denominational college, Utt did not have the luxury of teaching only courses in his specialty, modern French history. Over the years he taught a vast range of courses, including Western civilization, American history, Russian history, sociology, philosophy of history, and several classes in political science. He was an active teacher outside the classroom, too, co-leading a wide-ranging, discussion-oriented Sabbath School for many years. In every venue, he loved conversations with students. They relished hanging around his office, listening to his scintillating observations on world events, human nature, faith and credulity. On Friday nights or Sabbath afternoons, he opened his home to them, fostering wide-ranging discussions of significant, unassigned books. Most important of all, he remained in touch with many students long after graduation, dispatching thoughtful, candid letters to them as often as they wrote to him. Dozens of them kept cherished "Doctor Utt files," only vaguely aware that their mentor had any other correspondents.⁵

He devoted most of his professional life to one major research project—the story of Pastor Claude Brousson and French Protestant resistance to Louis XIV. He took four research trips to France, filled scores of notebooks with his tiny left-handed scrawl, purchased many rolls of microfilmed documents, made hundreds of pages of photocopies, and compiled lengthy bibliographical lists. When he died, he left behind a 900-page manuscript, which was well beyond a first draft, having been rewritten two or three times. In contrast to his other writings, he called this long-gestating book "the real one." *The Bellicose Dove: Claude Brousson and Protestant Resistance to Louis XIV, 1647-1698* was published in 2003 with Brian Stayer of Andrews University as the co-author and editor.⁶

Ready to share his knowledge of Protestant history with a wider audience, Utt wrote two historical novels published by Pacific Press: *The Wrath of the King* (1966) and *Home to Our Valleys!* (1977). His posthumous collaborator Strayer first resolved to study French and become an historian of France after a youthful reading of these works. A third novel was completed by Helen Godfrey Pyke and, with the earlier novels, issued as *No Peace for a Soldier* (2007) and *Any Sacrifice But Conscience* (2008).

Walter Utt died August 9, 1985, a victim of pneumocystis pneumonia. Like many hemophiliacs of that decade, his life was cut short by a tainted blood transfusion. He left behind his wife Martha, and two adult children: Shirley Downing, a psychiatric nurse, and Kenneth Utt, a history teacher and school principal.

After his death, a group of his students formed an endowment to honor his memory. The Walter C. Utt Endowment has supported a series of visiting professors, encouraged publication of his unfinished works, and promoted the building of an archival center at PUC, the Walter C. Center for Adventist History. The Utt Endowment was instrumental in the 2011 publication of a festschrift in his honor: *The Huguenots: History and Memory in Transnational Context*, edited by a former visiting "Utt Professor," David J. B. Trim.

"Walter Utt met life with a smile," said one of his students. "A sense of humor permeated every conversation, every letter, and every lecture. He was never embittered, never felt life had been unfair to him."

SOURCES

Anderson, Bruce. "Not Some Sainly Mr. Chips: A Memoir of Walter Utt." *Spectrum* 18, no. 4 (April 1988): 50-54.

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Anderson, Eric. "Walter C. Utt, My Colleague." In *The Huguenots: History and Memory in Transnational Context; Essays in Honor of Walter C. Utt*, edited by D. J. B. Trim. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011.

"Charles Utt obituary." *Pacific Union Recorder*, May 29, 1969.

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Utt, Walter C. and Brian E. Strayer. *The Bellicose Dove: Claude Brousson and Protestant Resistance to Louis XIV, 1647-1698*. Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2003.

Walter Utt's extensive correspondence and professional papers are housed in the Walter C. Utt Center for Adventist History at Pacific Union College.

NOTES

1. Walter C. Utt, *A Mountain, a Pickax, a College: Walter Utt's History of Pacific Union College*, 3rd ed (Pacific Union College, 1996), accessed June 15, 2020, https://www.puc.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/91805/Pickax-Book.pdf.
2. Bruce Anderson statement to author.
3. "Charles Utt obituary," *Pacific Union Recorder*, May 29, 1969, 7.
4. Bruce Anderson, "Not Some Sainly Mr. Chips: A Memoir of Walter Utt," *Spectrum* 18, no. 4 (April 1988), 52-53.
5. Ibid, 50.
6. Walter C. Utt and Brian E. Strayer, *The Bellicose Dove: Claude Brousson and Protestant Resistance to Louis XIV, 1647-1698* (Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2003).
7. Bruce Anderson, Pacific Union College Honored Alumnus Presentation, 1986.

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