Russell Melville Harlan, an Adventist artist and illustrator, was born on May 30, 1914 in Takoma Park, Maryland, the second son of Sanford M. (1886-1962) and Harriet Andrews Harlan (1887-1977). Russell displayed artistic talent as a youth and at age 16 began work in the Art Department at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, following in the footsteps of his father, who served at the Review for 55 years, most of them in the Art Department.1

Russell Harlan most often painted biblical portraits for Review and Herald publications. To do this, he would first find a model and take a picture. Colleagues at the Review or their families were often asked to pose. Next, Harlan would make a large 8x14 print in black and white. Setting it next to the easel, the print would be almost the same size as the painting. This would assist him in maintaining accurate proportions. Harlan was very meticulous, and each detail needed to be exact. His paintings, therefore, resembled photographs.2

Harlan had his own studio in the Art Department. Since the building lacked air conditioning, Harlan often sweated as he worked. To keep the sweat from running down his arm and ruining his artwork, he periodically would dip his arm in a bucket of cold water beside his desk to cool himself off.3

Harlan’s most well-known set of illustrations appeared in the book series The Bible Story by Arthur S. Maxwell. Harlan’s work also graced the pages of Red Letter Day and Other Stories, Storytime in Africa, Psalms for Tiny Tots, and many other books.

Harlan passed away unexpectedly due to kidney failure on November 12, 1972, at the age of 58.4 In his 42 years at the Review and Herald, Harlan contributed to the rise of Adventist illustrators in the mid-twentieth century that portrayed a loving, caring Jesus and brought Bible stories to life.

SOURCES


“Sanford Morrelle Harlan obituary.” ARH, September 6, 1962.

NOTES

Example of Russell Harlan’s artwork for a periodical, Youth’s Instructor, June 21, 1960.
Photo courtesy of Youth’s Instructor.


3. Ibid.