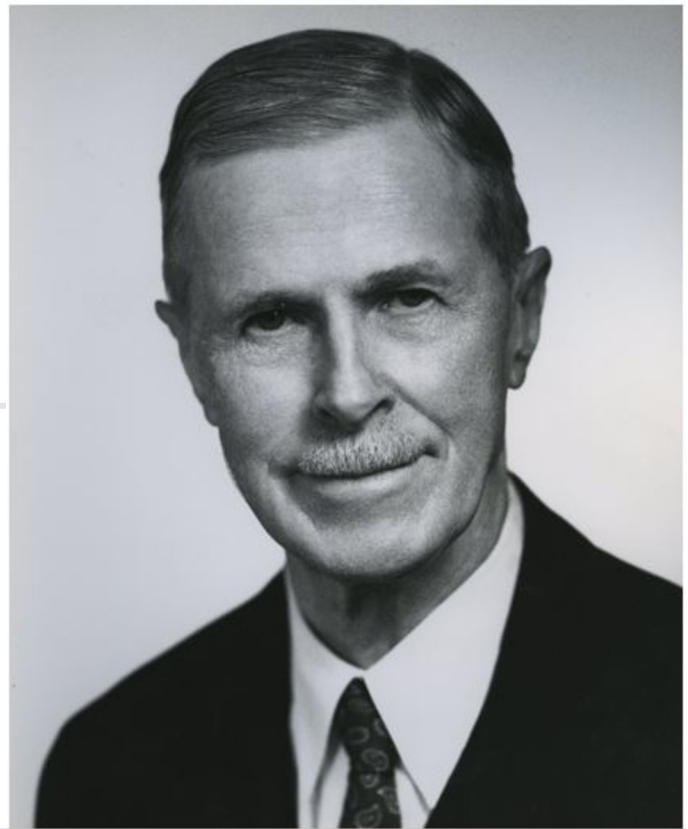


Olsen, Mahlon Ellsworth (1873–1952)

JOHN WESLEY TAYLOR V

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Mahlon Ellsworth Olsen was an eminent Adventist health advocate, denominational historian, and educator who pioneered distance education. He was the second son of Ole Andres Olsen (July 28, 1845-January 29, 1915), president of the General Conference from 1888 to 1897.

M. E. Olsen, President of Home Study Institute.

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

The Early Years (1873-1900)

Mahlon Olsen's father, Ole Andres Olsen, was born in Skogen, Norway, to Lutheran parents. When the Ole Olsen was about five years old, the family immigrated to the United States and settled in southern Wisconsin. In America, the Olsen family began to attend the Methodist church, and a few years later they were among the first Scandinavians to join the Adventist denomination. O. A. Olsen, their eldest son, was nine years old at that time and would later become an Adventist minister, as did his three brothers. James White took a special interest in Ole Olsen and often referred to him as "my boy."¹

O. A. Olsen married Jennie Gertrude Nelson (1843-March 17, 1920) in 1868 in Oakland, Wisconsin. A son, Alfred Berthier, was born in 1869, followed on March 28, 1873, by Mahlon Ellsworth, born in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. As a young boy, M. E. Olsen was personally acquainted with James and Ellen White. He heard them speak at

camp meetings and they were guests at the Olsen home in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Mahlon Olsen recalled, "On their first visit they looked over our small collection of books, somewhat the worse for wear, and before leaving they enriched our little library with four volumes of stories bearing the title *Sabbath Readings*. Mrs. White had herself selected the stories in these very readable books."²

The Olsen boys felt at home with Ellen White. She did not seem to mind their activity and was happy to see the children having a good time. She even wrote personal messages in the brothers' autograph albums. M. E. Olsen remembered that Ellen White "was fond of household duties and was not unskilled with her needle."³ He noted that both James and Ellen White seemed to understand the social and spiritual needs of young people. Later he wrote, "We children had favorite aunts and uncles, but even near relatives did not more completely win our hearts and affections than did James and Ellen White."⁴

O. A. Olsen was asked to serve as a missionary to Scandinavia in 1886 to head up the newly organized Adventist work, and his family moved with him. In the summer of 1887, Ellen White again visited the Olsen family, who were now living in Christiania (Oslo), Norway. Together they held the first Seventh-day Adventist camp meeting in Europe, where Ellen White was the principal speaker. Camp meetings were a new idea for the continent and although quite a number attended the meetings, there were only two family tents—one for Ellen White and her secretaries, and one for the Olsens.⁵

O. A. Olsen was called to be president of the General Conference in 1888 and the family returned to America to live in Battle Creek, Michigan. Goodlow Harper Bell had recently returned to Battle Creek following his term as principal of South Lancaster Academy, and Mahlon Olsen wished to study literature under Bell's guidance. Early one morning, he found the professor sitting on the edge of his porch, clad in blue jeans and wearing a dilapidated straw hat. "The whole bearing of the man impressed me at once with a sense of dignity and simplicity," Olsen recalled.⁶ Together, throughout the period of Olsen's college studies and until Bell's death, they studied both English and American authors. Olsen especially came to admire Wordsworth, Bell's favorite poet. Throughout Olsen's life, G. H. Bell was to continue to be his inspiration and the teaching of English and especially of literature became Olsen's best-loved work.

M. E. Olsen attended Battle Creek College from 1890 to 1894. His professors included Percy T. Magan in history and Frederick Griggs in the English department. W. W. Prescott was college president during much of this time. Olsen graduated from the classical course with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1894.⁷

After his graduation, M. E. Olsen became secretary to his father, who was still the president of the General Conference. He also began to take advanced work in English at the University of Michigan. During these years, Olsen wrote his first articles for the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. Thus, began an activity which was to yield nearly three hundred articles in Adventist journals over the course of his life. In these early articles, M. E. Olsen developed themes which would become dominant in his life. This included temperance, the study of literature,

correspondence schooling, the efficient use of time, and the importance of missionary work.

The Years in England (1900-1909)

In 1900, M. E. Olsen was called to assist his older brother, A. B. Olsen, a physician, in the Adventist health work in England. There, in November 1901, the Olsen brothers launched a magazine called *Good Health*.⁸ The first issue of the new journal carried an article written by Mahlon Olsen on the dangers of smoking.

Twenty thousand copies of that first issue were printed and by the following month only a few were left on the shelf. By the tenth month, subscriptions reached fifty thousand and the size of the magazine was enlarged. That issue carried a history of the Battle Creek Sanitarium written by M. E. Olsen. Throughout England, M. E. Olsen established Good Health clubs to study health principles and promote the magazine.

An announcement appeared in the July 1902 issue of the magazine: "Dr. J. H. Kellogg . . . has prepared the manuscript for a new book, entitled *The Living Temple*. *Good Health* has received permission to print some portions of this very interesting work in advance, and the first installment will appear next month."⁹ The only article by Kellogg in the next issue, however, dealt with appendicitis. The promised article did not appear until May 1903 after the Olsen brothers had brought Kellogg to England for a series of health conferences. At that time, an article entitled "The Living Temple" began with the words "God dwells in all nature."¹⁰ The November issue carried a notice stating that Kellogg's book *The Living Temple* could be obtained from the Good Health office. This relationship, however, soon changed when the denomination rejected Kellogg's pantheistic teaching. *Good Health* printed its last Kellogg article in June 1906.

In 1906, the Olsen brothers published *The School of Health*, a book which dealt with physiology, healthful cooking, and home treatments. The brothers also prepared a cookbook, *One Hundred Hygienic Food Recipes*, which proved popular. That year, M. E. Olsen also published his first book, *Out-of-Doors*, which he dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, the outdoor president whom he greatly admired. The book included references to walking and jogging for health—remarkable at a time when these concepts were still largely in the future.¹¹

By December 1906, there were 75,000 subscriptions to the journal with copies placed in all major British public libraries. *Good Health* was now the health journal of largest circulation in Great Britain.¹² In November of 1907, Olsen transitioned from managing editor to editor-in-chief. By this time, the journal regularly included an Ellen White article in each issue.

Olsen concluded his work as editor with the March 1909 issue. During his years in England, Olsen had begun doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, and he felt that he must dedicate himself full-time to finishing his program.

A Doctorate and Work at the Colleges (1909-1923)

When Olsen completed a PhD in English Literature at the University of Michigan in 1909, he was the first Seventh-day Adventist to earn a doctorate in English and only the second Adventist to receive a PhD degree.¹³ Olsen's dissertation, *Evolution of Biblical Prose*, would later be condensed and published by the denomination as *The Prose of Our King James Version*.

Two years earlier, with the expanding work of the Adventist church calling for missionaries faster than they could be supplied, the Washington Foreign Mission Seminary (later Washington Missionary College) in Takoma Park, Maryland, had been established. Now its president, J. L. Shaw, asked Olsen to come and teach English at the institution.

During his first year at the seminary, Olsen met Lydia Deborah Christensen (June 15, 1891-June 24, 1960).¹⁴ Lydia Christensen was the daughter of Peter Christensen, an Adventist pastor in Denmark, and had traveled to America in order to learn English. She was living with the General Conference president, Arthur Grosvenor Daniells, who was a close friend of Olsen. Lydia Christensen enrolled in one of Olsen's English classes at the seminary and soon Olsen was giving her private English lessons. By the spring of 1910, the two became engaged and at the close of that school year Lydia Christensen returned to Denmark to prepare for the wedding.¹⁵

In the summer of 1910, Olsen traveled to Europe to attend a workers' meeting in Germany, as well as to do research for a book on denominational history, which he had been asked to write. At the end of the summer, he traveled to Denmark and married Lydia Christensen.

Together the newlyweds returned to Takoma Park, Maryland, where he surprised her with a house that he had had built earlier that summer before leaving for Europe. A daughter, Louise, was added to the Olsen family in December 1911, and in the space of five years, three more children—Alice, Olan, and Yvonne—made the Olsen family complete.

Olsen was an enthusiastic teacher and brought a rich background of American, English, and world literature to the classroom. This knowledge had begun to accrue during the private lessons with G. H. Bell, his model teacher. His horizon widened during the years in England, his travels through Europe, and throughout his graduate studies.

During his tenure as English professor at the seminary, Olsen was intensely involved in writing *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists*. His purpose was to record the growth of the Advent movement, endeavoring to reproduce "the life of the early times."¹⁶ The *Review and Herald*, first-hand experiences, and interviews and correspondence with missionaries were the primary sources. The project, first suggested by A. G. Daniells, was begun in the latter part of 1909. Chapters of the history were submitted to W. C. (William Clarence) White and A. G. Daniels for critique.¹⁷ W. A. Spicer, S. N. Haskell, J. N. Loughborough, Frederick Griggs, and others helped with ideas and materials.

Olsen, however, began to encounter difficulties, with the work taking far longer to complete than he had envisioned.¹⁸ Not until 1923 would the *Signs of the Times* publish a series of thirteen articles summarizing Olsen's history as it was nearing completion. The book would finally be published in 1925—sixteen years later. "Had I at the onset realized to the full the difficulties that would confront me," Olsen wrote to W. C. White, "I am afraid I should have declined the task."¹⁹ Perseverance, however, prevailed.

While working on the denominational history, Olsen continued to write for the various Church publications. While there were several articles dealing with alcohol, tea, and insomnia, the health theme would disappear almost entirely over succeeding years, except for an occasional article stressing the evils of smoking.

In their place, Olsen began to write more on the topic of education. An article, entitled "The Public-School Teacher and the Christian Religion," for example, was published in *Liberty* magazine, in which Olsen maintained while a Christian public-schoolteacher should pray for the pupils and live a consistent Christian life, he or she should not seek by any means to compel the consciences of the pupils. He advocated a complete separation of church and state stating, "It is an old saying that we cannot make men good by acts of parliament. Neither can boys and girls be legislated into the kingdom."²⁰ An article in the *Review and Herald*, however, admonished Adventist parents to support the church schools by enrolling their children.²¹

In 1917, South Lancaster Academy called Olsen from Washington Missionary College (WMC) to serve as principal, following many years later, in the footsteps of G. H. Bell, who had been the first the institution's first principal in 1882. Olsen, however, found that filling his first role as an educational administrator was more difficult than he imagined. This was because Olsen was endeavoring to keep up his research and writing on Adventist history, while carrying responsibilities not only of principal, but also as business manager, English teacher, and superintendent of the industrial faculty.²²

Under Olsen's leadership the institution changed its name to Lancaster Junior College in 1918. By the following year, the College, which would subsequently become known as Atlantic Union College, was overflowing with the largest enrollment it had ever attained. Olsen announced that the academic emphasis was being balanced with practical subjects such as hydrotherapy, carpentry, sewing, physical culture, cooking, and farming. Olsen also promoted missionary activities and observed in 1920 that 138 missionaries had gone out from the institution.²³

That year Olsen accepted an offer to head the English Department at Union College, where he put in place a progressive program. Under the leadership of President Harvey Arch Morrison, Union was accredited as a junior college and the enrollment climbed to a peak level. The move to accreditation unsupported by the Union College board, Morrison accepted a call to WMC in 1922 and many of the college's most qualified teachers resigned under the more conservative leadership of the new president, Otto M. John.

Problems that had been rumbling in the English department surfaced suddenly in 1923. Olsen was summarily called before the college board and fired after twenty-nine years of denominational service. Part of this sudden move was due to political factors, as another faculty member apparently wished to run the department. A

deeper cause, perhaps, lay in certain questions concerning the books which Olsen required as reading for his English classes.²⁴

Olsen, nevertheless, did not believe that anyone had real doubts concerning his orthodoxy, and although he thought that his brethren had made a mistake, Olsen was not bitter. His problem was to decide what he should do next, now that he had been dropped from the faculty.

On March 30, 1923, Olsen wrote to a family friend, J. L. Shaw, who was treasurer of the General Conference. He explained his predicament and expressed his desire to continue in denominational employment if he was needed. Olsen noted that someone had inquired regarding his willingness to work at the Fireside Correspondence School. Olsen then proceeded to outline what was to become the focus of his work at that institution, "If there were a desire to enlarge that work, to do some aggressive field work, and put it on a more paying basis as well as to strengthen standards; if there were a real vacancy, I believe I should thoroughly enjoy it."²⁵

Shaw replied on April 18 that Olsen's case had been considered at the Spring Council but, as yet, no appointment had been made. The letter noted that Olsen had provided "twenty-nine years of earnest, efficient and faithful service" and hoped that something could soon be worked out.²⁶ Indeed, Shaw had already been appointed to a committee to locate a job for Olsen within the denomination and had suggested that Olsen head up Fireside.

From Fireside to HSI (1923-1946)

Within Adventist education, there had been a few brief attempts to develop correspondence schools. In the 1880s, Goodlow Harper Bell had started a correspondence course in English, although it was short-lived. The following decade, E. A. Sutherland began correspondence courses at Walla Walla College, and Keene Academy quickly followed suit with its own correspondence school. However, within a few years both had ceased operations.

Despite these false starts, the correspondence school idea did not die out in the mind of one of the foremost educational leaders of the church, Frederick Griggs. Under his guidance, the Fireside Correspondence School was founded in 1909 in Washington, District of Columbia, and W. E. Howell was designated principal.²⁷

It was to this post as principal of Fireside that Olsen was called in 1923. Perhaps the church leaders recalled Olsen's previous promotion of the Battle Creek Sanitarium correspondence school. Perhaps the decision was based, in part, on Olsen's commitment to sound scholarship.²⁸ Or it could well be that the position was available at an opportune moment in Olsen's career and that the influence of J. L. Shaw was a significant factor.

At any rate, Olsen soon arrived in Washington and proceeded to engage in his work at Fireside with enthusiasm. By the end of 1927, Fireside had grown to the largest enrollment of any school within the denomination,²⁹ and by

1930, 2,711 students were enrolled, representing over fifty countries.³⁰ This was in large measure due to Olsen's promotional activities. Later that year, Fireside received a new name, Home Study Institute (HSI), and branches were soon opened in the Far East, India, Australia, South America, and Europe.

Olsen believed that the only safe place for Adventist young people was in one of the denominational schools and maintained that HSI was established for helping those who were "temporarily hindered from attending a resident college."³¹ Relationships with the other Adventist colleges, however, were not always favorable. In 1942, for example, a refund had to be given to George Vandeman "at the request of EMC that he give his whole attention to the courses he is taking at the college."³²

In 1946, Olsen completed his twenty-three-year term as president of the correspondence school, having built Home Study Institute into an elementary through college institution that served the entire world field.

The Later Years (1946-1952)

After his retirement at the age of 73, Olsen devoted much of his time to writing. One of his first projects was to adapt his dissertation on the King James Bible for publication. A recent version of the New Testament, the Revised Standard, had appeared and was being proclaimed as a serious challenge to the King James Version. Olsen, however, did not share the popular enthusiasm.³³ He noted, nevertheless, that the Revised Standard Version did give evidence of fine scholarship and praised it "for preserving intact for us so many fine passages from the King James version."³⁴ The overall purpose for the book, however, was to trace the history of the translations of the English Bible from their early beginnings.

Olsen's last major writing project, completed but a few weeks before his death, culminated in the publication of *Much-Loved Books*.³⁵ In the book, Olsen advised readers to study the Bible, not merely as great literature, but as a power to transform the life. Olsen then proceeded to examine literary works by Martin Luther, William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, and John Greenleaf Whittier, among others. Olsen also dedicated a chapter to James and Ellen White.

Not all of Olsen's retirement was spent in writing. He again taught an upper division literature class at WMC. Students would often drop by to visit in the Olsen home where they found him to be an excellent conversationalist and a sympathetic listener.³⁶

The life of M. E. Olsen passed quietly into history on March 17, 1952, in Takoma Park, Maryland.³⁷ His influence, however, lives on through his work as health promoter, pioneer in Adventist higher education, church historian, prolific writer, and a friend of students.

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1. M. M. Olsen, *Memories and Experiences* (Copenhagen: n. p., 1936), 9. Translated by Dyre Dyresen in 1978.
2. M. E. Olsen, *Much-Loved Books* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952), 55.
3. *Ibid.*, 56-57.
4. *Ibid.*, 57.
5. Louise [Olsen] Walther to John Taylor, 18 November 1984, private letter, personal collection of the author.
6. M. E. Olsen, "Recollections of Prof. G. H. Bell," *The Youth's Instructor*, May 18, 1920, 4.
7. *Twentieth Annual Calendar of the Battle Creek College* (Battle Creek, MI: Battle Creek College, 1895), 46.
8. M. E. Olsen, "Our Name," *Good Health*, November 1901, 15.
9. M. E. Olsen, "Good Health Next Month," *Good Health*, July 1902, 67.
10. J. H. Kellogg, "The Living Temple," *Good Health*, May 1903, 362.
11. M. E. Olsen, *Out-of-Doors* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1910). This book was first published in England in 1906.
12. M. E. Olsen, "Christmas Greetings," *Good Health*, December 1906, 1.
13. Louise Walther to John Taylor, November 18, 1984. The first PhD had been received a year earlier in the area of history by Benjamin George Wilkinson (1872-1968) at George Washington University.
14. "Lydia Deborah Olsen obituary," *ARH*, August 25, 1960, 26.
15. Louise Walther to John Taylor, November 18, 1984.
16. M. E. Olsen to W. C. White, December 19, 1912, Ellen G. White Research Center. "It seemed wise to forego completeness," Olsen wrote, in order "to make possible a more life-like and adequate account of the movement." M. E. Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1925), 9.

17. Olsen wrote W. C. White, "Of this you may be sure, I would not think of putting on the press any chapters dealing with the work of your father and mother and other early pioneers without first getting as much help as possible from you." M. E. Olsen to W. C. White, December 19, 1912, Ellen G. White Research Center.
18. On December 19, 1912, Olsen wrote a lengthy letter to W. C. White and stated, "I confess some things have taken me longer than I myself expected, but I have been anxious that it should not be necessary to do the work over twice. If the history represents anything less than the very best I am able to do, it will not be satisfactory, and might as well not appear at all." (M. E. Olsen to W. C. White, December 19, 1912, Ellen G. White Research Center.) A month later he added, "I am inclined to think that you will understand more easily perhaps than some of the other brethren how much is involved in preparing a really good history of the denomination." (M. E. Olsen to W. C. White, January 19, 1913, Ellen G. White Research Center.)
19. M. E. Olsen to General Conference Council, January 16, 1913. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Record Group 11, Box 3106, Folder 1913-O.
20. M. E. Olsen, "The Public-School Teacher and the Christian Religion," *Liberty*, May 1, 1911, 20.
21. M. E. Olsen, "Is It Worth While?" *ARH*, August 24, 1916, 13.
22. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *SDA Yearbook 1918*.
23. M. E. Olsen, "Raising the Missions Service Flag at Lancaster Junior College," *ARH*, March 11, 1920, 22-23.
24. Shortly after his notification of discharge by the board, Olsen wrote to his friend, J. L. Shaw, "The higher English work is not very well understood, and hardly in favor...A good deal of ignorance exists in regard to the nature of English teaching in the higher College classes." M. E. Olsen to J. L. Shaw, March 30, 1923, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.
25. Ibid.
26. J. L. Shaw to M. E. Olsen, April 18, 1923.
27. Richard. W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1979).
28. Ibid.
29. M. E. Olsen, "The Largest School in the Denomination," *ARH*, December 22, 1927, 17.
30. M. E. Olsen, "Fireside Correspondence School," *ARH*, June 8, 1930, 138.
31. M. E. Olsen, "An Alarming Situation: Are We Facing It Courageously?" *ARH*, May 11, 1933, 19.

32. *Minutes of the H. S. I. Board*. Vol. II [1939-1981], January 8, 1942, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.
33. M. E. Olsen, *The Prose of Our King James Version* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing, 1947), 9.
34. *Ibid.*, 10.
35. The book was to be a larger volume, but the publishers, wanting a book which would sell more easily, omitted approximately half of the chapters, including one on G. H. Bell. Louise Walther to John Taylor, October 23, 1984.
36. *Ibid.*, October 23, 1984.
37. "M. E. Olsen obituary," *ARH*, March 24, 1952, 20, 22.

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