

Rowen, Margaret Matilda Wright (1871–1939)

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Margaret Rowen claimed to have the prophetic gift soon after the death of Ellen G. White (1827-1915) and led a breakaway group that took the name “Reformed Seventh-day Adventists.” She was discredited by failed predictions, exposure of fraudulent claims, and imprisonment for an attempted murder of a former follower, and her movement virtually disappeared after about a decade.

Early Life

Margaret Matilda Wright was born on October 29, 1871, in Upland, Delaware County, Pennsylvania.¹ Margaret’s mother, Matilda Flounders (1844-1930) first married James Henry Plummer (1839-1870) and had three children with him.² After they divorced, she married Allison Alfred Wright (1846-1897) in 1868. Margaret, or “Maggie” as her siblings knew her, was the first of four children resulting from this second union. Tragically, Margaret’s brother, Wilmer, and father both passed away in 1897.

Margaret married George Washington Rowen (1875-1935) on September 26, 1899. They had three children, all born in Chester Township, Pennsylvania: Maude I. Rowen (1900-1975), George Alfred (1904-1986), and John Plummer (1907-1982). Sometime between 1907 and 1910 the Rowen family relocated to Los Angeles, California, where they are listed in the 1910 United States Census. While not much is known about Margaret’s husband, George, later records list him as either a “laborer” or “ice deliveryman.”

Conversion and First Vision

Margaret converted to Seventh-day Adventism about 1912. Over the next year she formed a women’s prayer band and began to serve as its leader. Rowen recounted that one of the ladies in the group, a Mrs. Albright, who claimed to receive special dreams through a “special anointing of the Holy Spirit,” communicated to her a conviction that Margaret was specially “called” to “a work of which you little dream.”³ It was at a meeting of the women’s prayer group soon afterwards, on June 22, 1916, Rowen claimed, that she received her first vision and the prophetic gift as God’s “chosen . . . mouthpiece.”⁴ Her further claim that her gift was a direct continuation of Ellen White’s prophetic ministry was critical to her success in gaining a following.⁵

Rowen started a periodical, *The Reform Advocate and Prayer Band Appeal* through which she began to build her movement. Dr. Burt E. Fullmer and his wife, Jesse Noggle Fullmer, became two of her strongest supporters and moved into an adjacent apartment. Three Adventist ministers, P. W. Province from Oregon, and J. F. Blunt and F. I. Richardson from the Los Angeles area also joined her movement. Arthur L. White estimated that within a couple of years Rowen attracted at least a thousand followers.

Her first vision was later published in pamphlet form as *A Stirring Message for This Time*. The vision had three main sections: first, the fall of Lucifer and the entrance of sin in the Garden of Eden; second; the seven last plagues; and



Margaret W. Rowen
Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate.

third, a description of heaven after the Second Coming of Christ. In the first part she described how Lucifer and Gabriel in heaven were equals, but Lucifer aspired to God's position. Eventually he was thrown out of heaven with his angels and fell for seven days. God's throne during this time was "draped in black clouds" as "all heaven mourned."⁸ At this point the angels "lost confidence" in Satan who then sought to "overthrow . . . our first parents" to "regain [the] confidence" of the fallen angels. After seven years of planning, Satan entered the flying serpent, Eve's pet, who led her to take the forbidden fruit.⁷

In narrating the next part of the vision Rowen gives a detailed description of the seven plagues, which are from seven plague angels in heaven. Each plague takes seven years to plan.⁸ These plagues are the beginning of "four great events" that will take place just before the eschaton. Jacob's time of trouble immediately follows the plagues, then the voice of God proclaiming the close of probation, and finally the appearance of a small black cloud that ushers in Christ's return.⁹

In the last part of the vision, Rowen describes seeing the 144,000 who are "all sealed and numbered." She believes this group represents a literal number who travel to the sea of glass, which is a solid rather than a liquid, and carries them over ripples ever forward. When they reach Mt. Zion there is a temple of "both gold and silver" at which only the 144,000 are able to worship and receive their new names.¹⁰ After visiting Mt. Zion they travel on to the Holy City where they sit eating the leaves of the tree of life. Jesus then takes them to a "beautiful white temple above the city" where they use their wings to enter the third heaven. In this ultimate heavenly temple where the 24 elders worship, the 144,000 "partake of the marriage supper of the Lamb."¹¹ After the meal they travel with Jesus "thru space" to visit planets across the universe for the next 1,000 years.¹²

Meanwhile during the millennium, Satan who has become a hideous monster, torments Pilate as they walk over the bodies of those slain at Christ's coming.¹³ At long last Jesus returns to earth where the glorious city lands on a great plain. They live in "silver mansions" with "a large silver dome" as the city now becomes a temple where throngs across the universe come to worship. After another 100 years, the wicked are raised from the dead, and Satan, claiming to have resurrected them, leads them to attack the glorious city. It is finally at this point that "brimstone falls from heaven" as the earth is purified from the "defilement of sin."¹⁴

Supporters testified to supernatural physical phenomena accompanying Margaret Rowen's visions. Elizabeth Roberts described seeing Rowen in "vision" in her home "lying on the bed with hands folded across her breast and wide-open, unwinking eyes looking upward. . . . There was no breathing, as far as we could tell, and the body was rigid."¹⁵ N. J. Waldorf, who saw her in vision in March 1920, described similar characteristics: her eyes were open; her face was "natural" and had a "ruddy appearance"; yet her body was rigid and stiff as a board; her "breathing was almost imperceptible."¹⁶ As James White had done when Ellen White was in vision, Dr. Burt E. Fullmer repeatedly used both a candle (with no flame flickering to show breath) and a mirror (with no condensation forming) as proof of the genuineness of Rowen's visions. Dr. Fullmer further described Rowen's eyes gazing without blinking, and that her arm was "fixedly rigid."¹⁷ J. F. Blunt soon compiled many of these testimonies into *The Rowen Pamphlet* vigorously defending Rowen as a new prophetic messenger.¹⁸

In both content and form, there are some noticeable similarities between the first visions of Rowen (1916) and Ellen White (1844). Both women were of diminutive stature, converted from Methodism at a young age, and had their first vision when gathered at a Bible study group for women. Both women saw the Second Coming of Christ and toured the glories of heaven with Jesus and witnessed the heavenly banquet table. Similarly, they both extensively quoted Scripture. Yet there are also some significant differences. Rowen adds many details: Satan's fall from heaven lasting seven days and enshrouding heaven in darkness; seven years of planning Eve's fall through her pet serpent; an extra century after the millennium during which Satan makes plans to destroy the heavenly city. Of more theological significance, Rowen believed that Jesus was not part of the eternal Trinity. He was created by God and later adopted as God's only son and became a member of the Trinity.

Perhaps most distinctive of all is Rowen's special appeal to the outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit that she believed would be revealed in a very dramatic way.¹⁹ This distinctive emphasis upon the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in many ways mirrored the nearby Azusa Street revival that began a few years before in 1906, leading to the dramatic spread of Pentecostalism.

Response, Separation, and Controversy

The Seventh-day Adventist Church established a committee to address the question of Margaret Rowen's inspiration. This committee, consisting of I. H. Evans, W. C. White, E. E. Andross, M. M. Hare, B. E. Beddoe, and W. M. Adams, examined her writings.²⁰ Evans, White, Andross, and Hare met with Rowen in her home on February 21, 1917. The initial investigation was inconclusive and church leaders urged caution and patience. At the August 1917 Los Angeles camp meeting, General Conference president A. G. Daniells assured members that the church's leaders "had no evidence that would lead us to the conclusion that Mrs. Rowen was divinely called" but that the investigation was still ongoing. The following summer, at the 1918 Los Angeles camp meeting, Daniells reported on behalf of the General Conference Committee a "unanimous conclusion" that she was "not divinely inspired."²¹

Another major similarity between Rowen and the burgeoning Pentecostal movement was a strong emphasis upon revival and reform—particularly through strict adherence to a lifestyle of personal holiness in contrast to the laxity prevailing in the leading denominations of American Christianity. Rowen charged that the Adventist denomination was backslidden, especially on health and dress reform.²² As a case in point, Rowen contended that many Adventist ministers were not vegetarian. She was similarly concerned about what she saw as widespread abandonment of the

historic Adventist position against bearing arms in military service during World War I. Especially egregious for Rowen and her followers were Adventists who did not strictly observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Some Adventists had become so lax as to prepare elaborate meals on Sabbath, which required a significant amount of unnecessary labor.²³

Between 1916 and 1918 Rowen transitioned from calling for reform to directly declaring the denomination to be in apostasy. In another vision that occurred October 31, 1918, she declared that “Our [Seventh-day Adventist] denomination is no better than other denominations. The condition of the denomination will grow worse. The church is placing itself upon the same basis as the nation that makes an image to the beast. The shaking will bring every honest one to take his stand.” She furthermore stated: “I was given a dissolving view of the denomination.”²⁴ As a result, the only recourse was to separate from the denomination. On June 12, 1919, she wrote again: “Said the angel Do not be too anxious for the people to be members of a denomination, but keep ever before your mind that Jesus would have them surrender their hearts to him.”²⁵ Such messages that, in effect, called for believers to leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church and rally around her new “Reformed Seventh-day Adventist” movement, led to Rowen being disfellowshipped from the Los Angeles South Side Church on November 15, 1919.²⁶

Dramatic Claims

In 1919 Rowen concocted a scheme to have a letter “discovered” – a letter purportedly written by Ellen White, prophesying that Margaret Rowen would be her successor in the prophetic office. Rowen convinced Dr. Fullmer that, to her surprise, she had found such a letter, dated August 10, 1911, on a recent visit to the vault containing Ellen White’s original manuscripts and letters, then located at Elmshaven in northern California. She had taken it out, Rowen explained, fearing W. C. White’s reaction if he saw her with it. Now, she gave Dr. Fullmer the important task of clandestinely returning the letter so that no one would realize it had been missing. Fullmer and his wife successfully accomplished the mission. After Rowen made public her startling claim about the letter, W. C. White found that it had been inserted into the White Estate letter file. He provided overwhelming evidence showing that it was a rather botched attempt at a forgery, starting with the fact that it was the wrong kind of paper and the signature was obviously faked.²⁷

It would not be until later, after Dr. Fullmer became disenchanted with Rowen, that he admitted that he was the one who planted the letter. Rowen never admitted it was a forgery. Instead, she created another forged letter with William C. White’s signature in which he confesses to making a copy of his mother’s letter and replacing it with a spurious copy in an effort to discredit Rowen.

In 1917, prior to the forgeries, Rowen made the sensational claim to have been shown in vision that Matilda Wright was not her real mother. It was revealed to her that she was instead the illegitimate child of Alfred Wright and May Gillette. Her real mother subsequently married a wealthy businessman named Harold Mills, and was living near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In this new alternate reality of her childhood, Rowen alleged that her father initially considered drowning her, his illegitimate offspring, when she was an infant but decided instead to bring the baby home to his wife, saying he rescued her from abandonment on the wharf. The Wrights then adopted her as their own. Informed of the Mills’ address in a subsequent vision, Rowen contacted Mrs. Mills, eventually convincing her that she was her daughter. Then, the story continued, Rowen visited the Mills in Philadelphia for five weeks and during that visit Mrs. Mills had given Rowen large sums of money and assured her that she would inherit her estate. An investigation turned up no evidence for the existence of the Mills’ or for any of Rowen’s related claims, which she had used to explain a noticeably more luxurious lifestyle.²⁸

After investigating Rowen’s story, the Southern California Conference issued a pamphlet entitled *Darkness or Light, Which? An Examination of the Claims, Statements, and Dates of Mrs. Margaret W. Rowen and Teachings of the So-Called Reform Church*. The pamphlet went into detail about her problematic teachings and warned against time-setting. The tract furthermore reviewed the process which led to Rowen, Fullmer, and others being disfellowshipped to make it very clear that they were no longer Seventh-day Adventists.²⁹

In 1923, after “seven years of intense opposition” Rowen reported seeing in vision the words “The Awakenings” above the heavenly throne.³⁰ She took this as a sign that Christ would return in 1925.³¹ She now prophesied: “Thus saith the Lord, probation will close February 6, 1924. Jesus will return to the earth February 6, 1925.” This made newspaper headlines around the world, prompting Seventh-day Adventist church leaders to disavow any association with Rowen and her organization.³² In fact, her own mother, Matilda Wright, found it necessary to publicly denounce her daughter’s teaching about a date for the eschaton. She stated that she had lived for a time with her daughter and her family in Los Angeles, but in 1922 had found it necessary to live with other relatives since she “could not agree” with her daughter’s ideas.³³ Newspapers attributed several suicides to this apocalyptic date-setting.³⁴

Prison and Later Years

In 1925, Dr. Fullmer concluded that Rowen was a fraud after noticing that she was stealing from her own organization. In the March 26 issue of *The Reform Advocate* he included an article exposing her activities to an estimated 1,000 followers. In 1926, A. G. Daniells held a meeting that included a number of Margaret Rowen's followers, several of whom, most notably Fullmer and Julian Tweed, publicly confessed to their complicity in some of Rowen's fraudulent activities. An attempt was made to get Rowen to participate, but she refused to attend the meeting. According to Daniells, as evidence was presented about how she had forged documents many concluded that she "could not be followed any longer."³⁵

Fullmer began legal proceedings in late 1926, suing Margaret Rowen for unpaid debts and bonds that he had loaned to her. It became apparent that Rowen was stealing from her own organization in a giant scam.³⁶ The legal process was accelerated when Rowen conspired with two other devotees, Mary A. Wade and Dr. J. F. Balzer, to murder Fullmer. On the night of February 27, 1927, Fullmer was lured by a telephone call to an "automobile camp" where he was brutally attacked. The commotion prompted nearby campers to call the police. Wade and Balzer were quickly apprehended. The search for Rowen became a weeklong manhunt. Rowen finally turned herself in to Los Angeles police on March 8, claiming that she too had been lured into the auto camp and beaten, and then had become despondent and attempted suicide.³⁷

After arrest, the three were brought to trial. The "court subjected the three defendants to a profound denunciation," noting that the evidence overwhelmingly pointed to the fact that they had "intended to murder Dr. Fullmer."³⁸ The presiding judge, Judge Bowron, denied probation. When Dr. Balzer wrote a letter to the judge promising that he would be blessed in heaven if he would release him, the judge replied that he would take his chances doing his duty here on earth. The defendants were charged with "having lured [Fullmer] to the automobile park by telephone" and hitting him with a gas pipe. The report added that he was "subjected to a 'poison needle' attack" which he also survived.³⁹ Initially the three were charged with "conspiracy to commit murder" but later the charges were mitigated when they agreed to "plead guilty" to "assault by means and force likely to produce great bodily injury."⁴⁰ All three were sentenced to do time in San Quentin prison. Rowen's prison record states she was incarcerated on August 11, 1927, paroled on May 27, 1929, and discharged on March 11, 1931.⁴¹

After the "disappointment" of 1925 and Margaret Rowen's imprisonment in 1927, the Reformed Seventh-day Adventist-Rowenite movement disintegrated, though as late as the 1960s a few loyal followers remained who clung to the notion that she was a persecuted prophet.⁴²

On April 3, 1928, a little over a year after he was assaulted, Dr. Burt Fullmer died at the age of 57, the cause of death recorded as "angina pectoris."⁴³ Margaret Rowen died on August 5, 1939, in Alhambra, California, at age 67.⁴⁴

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NOTES

1. Family information in this and the subsequent paragraph from "Margaret Matilda Wright" in family tree at *FamilySearch*, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/sources/LZGG-75P>?
2. Her first three children were Henry (b. 1863), John (b. 1866) and James (b. 1868). These would have been older stepbrothers to Margaret. This research was obtained by collating data from Ancestry.com, December 17, 2020.?
3. Margaret W. Rowen, *The Elijah Message* (Los Angeles, CA, The Reform Press, ca. 1919), 11.?
4. Margaret W. Rowen, *A Stirring Message for This Time* (Pasadena, CA: The Grant Press, 1918), 3.?
5. Malcom Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 203.?
6. Rowen, *A Stirring Message*, 3-5.?
7. *Ibid.*, 5-7.?
8. *Ibid.*, 10.?
9. *Ibid.*, 15-18.?
10. *Ibid.*, 18-20.?
11. *Ibid.*, 25-27.?
12. *Ibid.*, 27.?
13. *Ibid.*, 29.?
14. *Ibid.*, 29-32.?
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- Elizabeth J. Roberts, "To Whom It May Concern," October 27, 1955, Box 12545, Folder "Mrs. Rowen—Prophet?," General Conference Archives.?
16. N. J. Waldorf, "Vision of Mrs. Rowen," handwritten document, received March 3, 1932, Folder: "Reference Files of L. E. Froom 1920s-30s-Mrs. Rowen," Collection #58, General Conference Archives.?
 17. Roger W. Coon to Clerk of SDA Ramona, CA, SDA Church, April 26, 2001 with attached notes, copy in possession of author.?
 18. Martin Gardner, "The Incredible Flimflams of Margaret Rowen, part 1: The Seventh-day Adventists and the Second Coming," *Free Inquiry* (Spring 1996): 36-40.?
 19. Margaret W. Rowen, *The Heart Work: Has It Been Done for You?* (n.p., n.d.), 2-3.?
 20. *Claims Disproved*, General Conference Committee, June 1920, 3.?
 21. *Ibid.*, 5.?
 22. Rowen, *The Elijah Message*, 6-8.?
 23. *Ibid.*?
 24. Cited by Clarence Santee, "The Old Landmarks," *Pacific Union Recorder*, August 11, 1921, 2.?
 25. *Ibid.*?
 26. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Reformed Seventh-day Adventists -- Rowenite."?
 27. *Claims Disproved*, 34-38.?
 28. *Claims Disproved*, 6-31; Larry White, "Margaret W. Rowen: Prophetess of Reform and Doom," *Adventist Heritage* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1979): 29-31; Gardner, "The Incredible Flimflams of Margaret Rowen," 38.?
 29. *Darkness or Light, Which? An Examination of the Claims, Statements, and Dates of Mrs. Margaret W. Rowen and Teachings of the So-Called Reform Church* (Los Angeles, CA: Southern California Conference, ca. 1924).?
 30. Margaret W. Rowen, "God Speaks Directly to His People from Heaven" (Los Angeles, CA: The Reform Press, ca. 1923), 4-5, 8.?
 31. *Ibid.*?
 32. See for example back page notice, "There Shall Arise False Prophets," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, February 14, 1924, 8.?
 33. "Mother Would Spank Her," *The Indiana Gazette*, February 6, 1925, 2.?
 34. "Fearing End of World Woman Hangs Self and Another Tries Leap, Man Shoots Spouse, Kills Self," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, February 7, 1925, 2.?
 35. A. G. Daniells to L. Flora Plummer, March 15, 1926, General Conference Archives, Collection #58, Folder: "Reference Files of L. E. Froom 1920s-30s—Mrs. Rowan."?
 36. Burt and Jackie Fullmer to "My Dear Brothers and Sisters," March 17, 1927, copy in possession of author.?
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 38. "Prophetess of Doom to Prison," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1927, 19.?
 39. *Ibid.*?
 40. *Ibid.*?
 41. California, U.S., Prison and Correctional Records, 1851-1950, San Quentin State Prison, Inmate Photographs and Mug Books, Mug Book (1926-1956), 62413-71409, accessed December 17, 2020, Ancestry.com.?
 42. Personal knowledge from a conversation with the late Stan Hickerson who pastored in Southern California and who shared that into the 1960s there were still those who defended Rowen as a true prophet.?
 43. "California, County Birth and Death Records, 1800-1994," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QP7T-QPG1>, Burt Emerson Fullmer, 1928.?
 44. "California, County Birth and Death Records, 1800-1994," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QLYV-VVSH>, Margaret Rowen, 1939.?
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