

# White, Edward Eric (1909–2003)

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## GILBERT M. VALENTINE

Gilbert M. Valentine, Ph.D. has served internationally in teaching and senior administrative roles in Adventist higher education in Europe, Asia, the South Pacific and North America. He has written extensively in Adventist studies and has authored several books, including biographies of *W. W. Prescott* (2005) and *J. N. Andrews* (2019). *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011) explored the political influence of Ellen White. He has also written for the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013).

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Edward Eric White gave almost fifty years of service to the Seventh-day Adventist church in three world divisions. He served as a science teacher, high school headmaster, and college principal in England; as senior educational administrator and college principal in the Australasian Division; and as an education director in the Euro-Africa Division. He also authored a notable volume on Adventist hymnology.

## Background and Early Life (1909-1931)

The youngest of two sons born to William George (b. 1875) and Grace (nee Gibbs) White (1877-1940), Edward Eric White was born in Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire, on August 2, 1909. Both of his parents came from families involved in the region's famous shoe and boot manufacturing industry based in Kettering, 83 miles north northwest of London.<sup>1</sup> His father, originally from Limehouse in East London, was a foreman boot clicker (overseeing the cutting out of boot uppers) and his mother a shoe fitter. His mother had been born in the village of Potton, Bedfordshire, to parents who were also involved in the footwear industry on the retail side. In Irthlingborough, the family lived at 3 Manton Road in houses typical of a Midlands industrial town?<sup>2</sup>

In 1906, four years after her 1902 marriage, Grace White, came into contact with Seventh-day Adventists and was baptized by American evangelist W. D. Maclay in the Kettering church, along with some of her siblings.



Edward E. White

Photo courtesy of South Pacific Division Heritage Centre.

Husband George White did not connect with his wife's new faith. She became actively involved in the nearby Rushden, and later the Kettering and Wellingborough, churches. Edward White, known affectionately to family and colleagues as Eddie, was thus nurtured in the Adventist church from childhood and grew up with an awareness of uncles and aunts involved in the mission of the church.<sup>3</sup> He was baptized in February 1927 at the age of 18.

White attended the Irthlingborough Primary School in his hometown and then transferred to the prestigious Wellingborough Grammar School, a boarding school founded in 1595. He completed his matriculation examinations at Wellingborough in 1925. During the following two years, White undertook teacher-training under the British "pupil-teacher" apprenticeship system doing his practice teaching at Northampton Town and County School and the Irthlingborough Primary School.<sup>4</sup> In late 1927, he enrolled at Stanborough Park College to undertake the ministerial training course from which he graduated in 1931. White, attracted to university studies during his last two years of ministerial training at Stanborough Park, enrolled to study for the requirements for a Bachelor of Science degree from London University. In August 1930, he earned his degree with second-class honors and the public congratulations of "uncle" Arthur Maxwell, the editor of his union conference church paper.<sup>5</sup> He was the first Seventh-day Adventist to graduate from London University.<sup>6</sup> During his last year at Stanborough Park, because he already had teacher qualifications, he also taught two classes.

After a summer of evangelistic work in Bolton, in September of 1930, on the strength of his Bachelor's degree, W. C. G. Murdoch, the principal of Stanborough Park College, invited White to join the staff as a full-time science teacher.<sup>7</sup> A year later, in 1931, he moved with the school to its more spacious new location at Newbold Revel in Rugby when it was renamed Newbold College.

## Teaching and Administration in England (1932-1947)

In August 1932, at the age of twenty-three, White married Marjorie Annie Brown in the Stanborough Park church with his Newbold principal W. C. G. Murdoch conducting the service.<sup>8</sup> Born in Dorchester in 1906, Marjorie Brown had become an Adventist at age eighteen, along with her mother and sister, under the ministry of O. M. Dorlund. Marjorie's sister, Gwendoline Brown became the matron of Stanborough Park College in 1924. In 1927, Marjorie Brown enrolled at the college (at the same time as White) and graduated in 1929. She then took up a secretarial posting in the youth department of the North England Conference.<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Brown's winsome ways with young people and her rich contralto singing voice, accompanied by Edward White, on the piano considerably augmented the couple's effectiveness when they took up residence on the Newbold Revel campus. In 1933, a year after his marriage, White further expanded his usefulness to Newbold by obtaining a Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in mathematics, also from London University. His teaching responsibilities expanded to include mathematics and geography.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of limited laboratory facilities at Newbold Revel, White focused on expanding the science curriculum and in 1936 oversaw an enlargement and updating of the laboratory.<sup>11</sup> He spent much of his time bringing ministerial students up to college-entrance level by teaching math and science to secondary matriculation level.<sup>12</sup> However, with only 120 students it appears that his hopes to be able give “a year’s course in medicine after matriculation” so that Adventist students could prepare for their first medical examination at Newbold was not realized because of limited finances.<sup>13</sup> In order to stretch finances further, the college required him to spend every second summer in evangelistic work. He joined teams in Hull (1933), Lincoln (1935), and Plymouth (1937).<sup>14</sup> In 1936, the couple welcomed Marjorie White’s five-year old niece, Kathleen Hargreaves, into their home as a foster daughter. Kathleen’s mother, Gwendoline, the wife of missionary doctor to Persia, Henry Hargreaves, had died unexpectedly.<sup>15</sup>

In June 1940, despite his bereavement at the unexpected death of his sixty-three-year old mother, White accepted the invitation to become the founding headmaster of a secondary school church leaders had, for some time, been planning to launch at Stanborough Park.<sup>16</sup> Plans for the school envisioned an initial enrollment of 100 with a curriculum that would take students through to matriculation. The school would, thus, serve as a feeder school for Newbold College.<sup>17</sup> As White later explained, the “phony war” with Germany during 1939 had made planning for a school seem a risky undertaking for the church. The government had already annexed the Stanborough Park’s sanitarium buildings for military use and they were occupied by London University College Hospital. However, leaders had pressed on with a strong sense of following providence.

White presided over the opening of the new secondary school with its 110 pupils and four teachers on September 3, 1939, the same day that Britain declared war on Germany in response to Germany’s invasion of Poland two days earlier. The school convened in Sheepcote Villa, an unoccupied nurses’ home, adjacent to the existing elementary school on the Stanborough property. White served as headmaster with a full-time teaching schedule and also kept the school accounts. Under White’s leadership, enrollment steadily grew until, in 1946, it achieved an enrollment of 300 with a teaching staff of ten. At that time, with the cessation of hostilities, the school was able to expand into the derequisitioned sanitarium annex.<sup>18</sup>

When W. G. C. Murdoch accepted an appointment to Avondale College in 1946, White was appointed to replace him as principal of Newbold College and during the summer he relocated to Rugby. He was ordained at Watford in August 1946 before he took up his appointment. By the end of his first year at Newbold, White had completed the work for his Master of Science degree at London University. Around this time, he also completed a Diploma of Education from Oxford University.

## Educational Leadership in the South Pacific (1948-1970)

Upon the completion of his Master’s degree in 1947, White, following his mentor, W. C. G. Murdoch, accepted an invitation from the Australasian Union Conference to serve as an associate secretary in both the education and

the Young People's Missionary Volunteer departments at Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia.<sup>19</sup> Arriving in January 1948, in time to conduct teacher and administrators seminars, he worked with American A. W. Peterson in nurturing the post-war expansion of the Australasian Union's school and college system.<sup>20</sup> White's familiarity with the British educational system, which at that time was closely followed in Australia and New Zealand, was especially appreciated. He provided contemporary professional development for the South Pacific teaching force. His British accent, his love of music, enthusiasm for the game of cricket, together with his deep spiritual sensitivity, endeared him to the teachers and to the young people of the Australasian Union. He was a popular week of prayer and camp meeting speaker.

Late in 1952, when Murdoch was invited to teach at the Theological Seminary at in Washington, District of Columbia, White was appointed to replace him as principal at Avondale College. The role also involved being pastor of the college church. White had been a member of the college governing board for the previous five years, so he was aware of the challenges when he took up the appointment in 1953. Financial and personnel constraints were major issues both at the college and in the division and the constraints impacted White personally.<sup>21</sup> At the same time that he was appointed to Avondale, he was asked to also carry the role of acting division education secretary because sixty-two year old A. W. Peterson had returned to the United States to take up a pre-retirement role with H. M. S. Richards at the Voice of Prophecy.<sup>22</sup> In mid-1954, White was requested to take full responsibility for the department until a replacement could be made. The short supply of qualified personnel was an acute problem, which White also found himself addressing in the church's burgeoning school system because, as he noted in a report to the church, the government offered "very attractive financial inducement" to teacher trainees.<sup>23</sup>

In his role as interim division education secretary that year, White was responsible for overseeing 484 schools across the division with 668 teachers and a combined enrollment of 12,474 pupils. There had been a 24% increase in enrollment since 1950, with most of the growth taking place in the pacific islands. At the end of 1954, Gordon McDowell arrived from New Zealand Missionary college to relieve White of his double duty.

At Avondale, White's priority was to oversee the smooth implementation of a new affiliation agreement with Pacific Union College in California that had previously been negotiated by Murdoch. Under the arrangement, Avondale was able to offer students four-year accredited degrees in theology and in secondary education.<sup>24</sup> A thirty percent drop in enrollment (from 360 to 262) in the first two years of White's principalship became a major concern, which he addressed with an aggressive promotional campaign throughout 1954, trying to correct widespread rumors that "students do not attend Avondale because the work has no place for them when they have completed their course." He produced figures on graduate employment that sought to dispel the false ideas.<sup>25</sup> It was not until 1961, however, that enrollment exceeded the 400 that had been achieved in 1950.<sup>26</sup>

Once released from the additional division responsibilities, White began his own PhD study program in science, at first through the external studies department at London University. He completed the program in late 1956

following a nine-month residency on the London campus. Alfred F. Kranz served as acting principal in his absence.<sup>27</sup> Following his return to Cooranbong, White succeeded in 1958 in laying a foundation for a stronger science program by recruiting Eric Magnusson to head the program. Magnusson had completed his London Bachelor of Science at Avondale during White's first year on campus and had then gone on to complete two PhD degrees, one at the University of New South Wales and the other at White's alma mater in London. Magnusson returned to Avondale in 1960.

White's leadership at Avondale between 1953 and 1958 also had to address theological challenges introduced by the schismatic Shepherd's Rod movement and by Robert Brinsmead, a student who had enrolled in 1955 and who developed non-traditional perfectionist ideas which he actively promoted on campus. In 1958, White's faculty did not permit Brinsmead to re-enroll to complete his studies. Working closely with division officers, White helped arrange for British theologian, Edward Heppenstall, to conduct an eight-week theological seminary extension school at Avondale during the yearend summer of 1957 to address the theological issues. Heppenstall led out in courses on the sanctuary, grace, and law.<sup>28</sup> It was the Avondale's first venture into graduate studies.

At the end of the 1958 academic year, White vacated the principal's office at Cooranbong and returned to Wahroonga, to take up the work of the division educational department, changing places with E. Gordon McDowell who moved to Cooranbong to take the role of college principal. This time there was no associate in the department—the role he had himself initially filled at the division. Nonetheless, in addition to education, White was also assigned the role of religious liberty secretary—he had become used to double duty. During the three, four-year terms White served as education secretary, he oversaw almost thirty per cent combined enrollment growth in Adventist schools and colleges from 14,115 to 19,995. While the number of individual schools declined, the number of teachers increased by more than 200 from 711 in 1959 to 918 in 1969. In 1962, he revived the central staffing committee in order to ensure that the “needs of the field as a whole” could be considered and that properly qualified teachers be placed appropriately to meet the rising educational standards.<sup>29</sup> One of White's primary goals was to encourage the moving of schools from the backrooms of churches to purpose built professional facilities that could often be shared by groups of churches. In this, he was successful. Another notable strategic goal of his tenure was the development of national leadership in pacific island schools. This he accomplished by planning and funding, in partnership with his three union mission education directors, special professional development programs for principals and senior teachers in a “School for National Workers,” (1963) and by enthusiastically supporting course development at the permanent union mission training schools such as Fulton College in Fiji. The launch of the new Sonoma Adventist College near Rabaul in Papua New Guinea in 1968 contributed to this goal as well. He also regularly scheduled professional development in-service programs for classroom teachers. White's quadrennial reports are notable for their insightful statistical analysis.<sup>30</sup> The figures he was most encouraged by, however, were those that recorded student baptisms—an outcome he on which he placed emphasis. During his tenure 11,658 student

baptisms took place across the school system.<sup>31</sup>

## Educational Leadership in the Euro-Africa Division (1970-1980)

In 1964, during a furlough visit home to England, White spent three days in Berne, Switzerland, in consultation with the officers of the then Southern European Division over educational matters.<sup>32</sup> White's fluency in both French and German appealed to the European leadership and, at the General Conference session in Atlanta in 1970, he was invited to serve as the education secretary for the newly named Trans-Mediterranean Division. With the re-alignment of division territories and the renaming of the division as the Euro-Africa Division in 1971, White became responsible for supervision of the church's education work across fifty-six different countries, twenty-eight of which were in Europe and twenty-eight in Africa.<sup>33</sup> The new assignment involved broad planning with particular focus on national leadership development and the oversight of the division's senior colleges.<sup>34</sup> White served on the governing boards of the four tertiary colleges providing ministerial training, Collonges in France, Bogenhofen in Austria, Marienhohe in Germany, and the training college at Nanga-Eboka in the Republic of Cameroon. In 1972, he was closely involved in the planning for the new Graduate School for French-speaking workers which was eventually established at Nanga-Eboka in Cameroon as the *Seminaire Adventiste d'Etudes Superieures pour l'Afrique Francophone*.<sup>35</sup>

## Retirement (1981-2003)

White retired from full-time denominational employment in 1980 at the time of the Dallas General Conference session and returned to settle in Bracknell, England, near Newbold College. In retirement, he continued to teach in the area of his avocation at Newbold. Students enjoyed his lively classes in hymnody and worship, and in education, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. He was active in leadership of the alumni association, continued to undertake translation work for his former colleague, Dr. Jean Zurcher, and also continued to be involved in the Newbold church as an elder and Sabbath School teacher.<sup>36</sup> In 1982, the couple celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary at an event hosted by friends at Newbold and in the same year accepted an invitation to return to Avondale to address former students and staff at the annual homecoming weekend. He continued to be invited to preach at area churches and, in 1985, he authored the second quarter world-wide Sabbath School lesson series focused on Second Timothy.<sup>37</sup>

In 1993, deafness prevented White from continuing his part-time teaching and in March 1994 he suffered the loss of his wife Marjorie whose declining health for some time had prevented her from participating in regular worship services.<sup>38</sup> White continued his participation in church services and enthusiastically enjoyed the hymn singing to the amusement of close friends who noted that "he would occasionally get the timing wrong and his solo baritone be heard when the song had ended."<sup>39</sup> He died on February 21 2003. The funeral service at Easthamstead Crematorium was led by Newbold church pastor Ian Sleeman and long-time friend Dr. John



Woodfield.<sup>40</sup>

## Contribution

Eddie White (as his friends called him) contributed extensively to the development of Adventist education in three divisions and is recognized for a wider influence on the church.<sup>41</sup> He is remembered with gratitude for his commitment to raising educational standards, his modeling of the pursuit of graduate study in public education, and his encouragement of colleagues and gifted young people to pursue such study in order to more effectively serve the church. He and Marjorie are also remembered for their generosity and warm hospitality to the many young people under their care and for White's remarkable talent for remembering names. His study of Adventist hymnody also made a lasting contribution to the church.

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