

# White, Mary Ellen Kelsey (1857–1890)

JERRY A. MOON

Jerry A. Moon, Ph.D., served as chair of the Church History Department in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University (2002-2016) and as editor of *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (2000-2009). He co-edited *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Review and Herald, 2013) and co-authored *The Trinity* (Review and Herald, 2002). His dissertation, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White: The Relationship between the Prophet and Her Son*, was published by Andrews University Press in 1993.

Mary (Kelsey) White, the first wife of William C. White, served as an editor, treasurer, and missionary.

## Early Life

Mary Ellen Kelsey was born April 20, 1857, in Leroy Township near Battle Creek, Michigan. Mary's mother, Eunice Rebecca [nee Bushnell] (1820-1906), was born in Old Saybrook, Middlesex County, Connecticut, USA. At the age of 13 Eunice witnessed the meteoric shower of 1833, and by 18 she had qualified herself as a public school teacher. Mary's father, Asa Post H. Kelsey (1818-1857) was born in Schoharie, New York. After their marriage, July 4, 1838, the Kelseys moved west to Leroy Township, Michigan, where Asa operated a saw mill. Under the ministry of Joseph Bates, the Kelseys became Sabbathkeepers in 1852 and charter members of the first Seventh-day Adventist church in Battle Creek, Michigan. When that congregation erected their first building, Asa Kelsey provided the lumber.

Mary Kelsey was the youngest of five children: Oliver Austin (1842-1924), Hannah Louise (1847-1937), George Henry (1848), George Edgar (1849-1930), and Mary Ellen (1857-1890). Mary never really knew her father because, on July 24, 1857, just three months after her birth, he died of erysipelas leaving his widow with four children.

Mary grew up in Leroy Township, near Battle Creek, Michigan, which was, during her lifetime, the world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventists. Before she was 13, she began work at the publishing office in



Mary White

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

Battle Creek, and during her first few months there made public her commitment to Jesus Christ. She rapidly advanced from folding papers in the bindery to typesetting to proofreading, while also attending school. In the fall of 1874 she was a student at Battle Creek College, majoring in French, working at the publishing house, and living in the home of James and Ellen White. Mary earned her room and board by caring for Addie and May Walling, Ellen White's grandnieces, dressing them in the morning and putting them to bed at night.

## Career and Marriage

In January 1875, at age 17, she accompanied James and Ellen White to Oakland, California, where she became assistant editor of the *Signs of the Times*. Just before Mary's 19th birthday in April 1876, she was elected treasurer of Pacific Press and appointed "local editor" of the *Signs of the Times*.<sup>1</sup> Her editorials show her to have been a cogent polemicist. In one of them she capably refuted four arguments given in support of Sunday "sanctity."<sup>2</sup>

A few weeks after Mary's arrival at Pacific Press, William C. White (1854-1937), James and Ellen White's third son, also joined Pacific Press as acting business manager. A year later, Feb. 9, 1876, W. C. White and Mary Kelsey were married in Oakland, California. After a brief honeymoon in Petaluma, California, the newlyweds resumed their work at Pacific Press, and continued residing with Willie's parents. Ellen was enthusiastic about her new daughter-in-law. "Mary and Willie are doing well. They are cheerful. Mary is a perfect general in the house. I have no care of household matters. They are very economical in expending means."<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1876 the General Conference laid plans to establish a publishing house in Europe and asked W. C. and Mary White to assist in that work. Little did they imagine that nine years would elapse before they actually embarked for Europe. Mary continued as managing editor of *Signs of the Times* until the summer of 1877 when she and her husband returned to Battle Creek College to study French and German in preparation for going to Europe. Whatever they accomplished in language study was done in addition to multiple leadership responsibilities in Battle Creek. In 1879-80, Mary helped to edit the *Youth's Instructor*. Willie was elected to the college board of trustees, the Health Reform Institute, the executive committee of the Sabbath School Association, and in 1879 became acting foreign missions secretary for the General Conference.

In 1880 William and Mary were called back to Oakland to rescue Pacific Press from serious financial problems that had developed during their absence. This time, the resident editor was J. H. Waggoner and Mary's name was not on the masthead. Instead, she became one of Ellen White's most trusted literary assistants. In May 1880 Mary accompanied her mother-in-law to the Milton, Oregon, camp meeting, after which Ellen White reported approvingly that Mary "worked very very hard in many ways at the camp meeting, copying, cooking, playing the organ, acting for [representing] Willie in the Sabbath school work."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the responsibilities William had been given during their stay in Battle Creek, three years later he was elected to the five-member executive committee of the General Conference. These expanded

responsibilities made a big difference for Mary, and their daughter Ella, born in 1882. As Willie's responsibilities increased, so did the length of his absences from home. When he "had been gone an age," and would "probably be [gone] another month," Mary expressed, with a bit of humor, her way of coping. "Blessed be labor. How thankful I am that I do not have to sit idly down and count my fingers till you come. I would rather count book pages." Mary then reported that she was 300 pages into the most extensive book project undertaken by Ellen White during the 1880s, the revision of her early *Testimonies for the Church*.<sup>5</sup>

### Editorial Work and European Service

Between 1855 and 1879, the first 28 *Testimonies* had been issued as pocket-size pamphlets. An 1878 General Conference resolution called for publishing them in a more permanent form, clothbound in a larger page size. Since the type would need to be reset, Ellen White wanted her staff to carefully examine the material and, where needed, revise wording, correct imperfect grammar, and improve clarity of expression. Mary's high respect for the integrity of Ellen White's writings, and the conscientious care with which Mary entered upon the work of revision is obvious in another letter to Willie: "The fear that we may make too many changes or in some way change the sense haunts me day and night."<sup>6</sup> The text preparation of *Testimonies for the Church*, volumes 1-4, was finished, ready for the publisher, in July 1885, mere weeks before their departure for Europe.

In August 1885 Ellen, William, Mary, and their daughter, Ella, left for Europe. Ellen White would travel widely, preaching, and counseling the scattered Adventists of the Central European Mission, the Scandinavian Mission, and the British Mission. When not accompanying his mother in travel, W. C. White was to "take charge of the finishing and furnishing" of the Basel, Switzerland, publishing house, including the purchase of "presses and machinery."<sup>7</sup> William and Mary's second daughter, Mabel (1886-1981), was born in Basel, Switzerland. In addition to caring for her daughters, Mary worked in the Central European Mission and the publishing house, and served as literary assistant and occasional travel companion to Ellen White. Again, Mary compensated for her husband's absences by filling her days with useful labor. Her mother-in-law wrote, "Mary White has every moment employed in writing, preparing manuscript, reading proof, when she is not compelled to take care of her children."<sup>8</sup>

## Illness and Death

In the spring of 1887, after living for two winters in the poorly heated building that served as both home and workplace in Basel, it became evident that Mary had contracted tuberculosis. Though her husband rushed her home to the Battle Creek Sanitarium, physicians gave her but a short time to live.

"We find Mary looking badly," Ellen White wrote from Oakland a year later, "and my heart is pained as I consider how the dear child labored in Switzerland, not saving herself. . . . She is patient and makes no complaints; not a murmur escapes her lips. . . . It is a great comfort for her to have Willie with her, although it is seldom she has the pleasure of his society. Stern duty calls him here and there, and although he bears a very sad heart as he

sees Mary—who has been so unselfish, so forgetful of self—weak and an invalid, yet he tries to be cheerful and never speaks one word of repining.<sup>9</sup> Ellen White bought a small house for Mary in Burroughs Valley, California, hoping the desert climate would enable her to recover, but despite all efforts to save her, Mary died in Denver, Colorado, June 18, 1890, age 33.

Regarding Mary's personal character, the voluminous correspondence between Mary, William, and Ellen White, provides many examples of her wit, her devotion to God and the church, amazing energy, and general buoyant personality. As noted in several quotations above, Ellen frequently expressed her appreciation for Mary's drive, hard work, and cheerfulness under adversity. Among all the positive things Ellen White had to say about her daughter-in-law, it is difficult to find any negatives. In one place she does suggest that Mary's personality was more action-oriented than emotional, but it is doubtful whether Ellen White considered this a defect. "Mary and Sarah are full of business. Christine is good, tender; so tender and kind and motherly to Ella."<sup>10</sup>

Mary Kelsey White's contribution to the Adventist movement centered in the publishing work, to which she gave 20 of her 33 years. Besides editing periodicals, she was one of Ellen White's most trusted literary assistants. Mary's most extensive project between 1881 and 1885 was helping to prepare a new edition of the first four volumes of Ellen White's *Testimonies for the Church*.<sup>11</sup>

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The two articles above are based on interviews with Frank Kelsey, who was the son of Oliver Austin Kelsey and the grandson of Asa Post Kelsey. Despite the entertaining, journalistic style, these articles have a mostly factual core. Includes stories of the early 1830s when three Kelsey brothers settled in the Leroy area, of Indians, bought off with food from Eunice, of As Kelsey's great wealth by the time of his death, of Eunice's sizeable monetary contributions for the startup of the Health Reform Institute, etc.

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## NOTES

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2. Mary White [M.K.W.], "Sunday Desecration." *Signs of the Times*, June 15, 1876, 213.
3. Ellen G. White to James White, April 4, 1876, Letter 3, 1876.
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5. Mary White to W. C. White, January 29, 1883.
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9. Ellen G. White to Sister Scott, May 4, 1888, Letter 75, 1888.
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11. On the revision of *Testimonies*, vols. 1-4, see Moon, *W. C. White*, 122-129; Thompson, "Adventists and Inspiration"; A. L. White, *Ellen G. White*, 3:217-19; and Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3:94-98.

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