

Tait, Asa Oscar

(1858–1941)

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Asa O. Tait was an editor of the evangelistic periodical *Signs of the Times* for more than three decades.

Early Years

Born August 20, 1858, in the village of Hanover in Licking County, Ohio, Asa Tait was the only surviving child of James W. Tait (1831-1889) and Catharine Skinner Tait (1839-1861). A brother, Franklin Spencer, died as an infant on July 6, 1861, and Catharine Tait died a few weeks later on August 20, leaving three-year-old Asa without a mother. His father married Nancy J. ("N. J.") Elliott (1832-1925) on December 16, 1866, and relocated in Onarga, a village in Iroquois County, Illinois, about 90 miles south of Chicago. The couple had no children but took into their home and raised N. J.'s niece, Agnes Belle Elliott (1861-1925), whose mother died when she was a small child.¹

Asa Tait, likely under the care of a relative, remained in Ohio until December 1876 when he joined his father's household in Onarga and established himself as a carpenter.² Earlier that year James and N. J. Tait as well as Agnes Elliott had become Seventh-day Adventists through the evangelistic labors of Robert F. Andrews (1834-1922) and George W. Colcord (1843-1902). A church was organized at Onarga and in 1877 Asa also accepted the Adventist message and was baptized by Elder Andrews.³

Ministry in the Illinois Conference



Asa Oscar Tait, 1932.

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

The young convert made a positive impression on James White (1821-1881), co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist church, when White preached at the Onarga church on May 6-7, 1881, and stayed in the Tait home. Before he died on August 6, 1881, White recommended to Andrews, by then Illinois Conference president, that he encourage Asa Tait to enter the ministry. Accordingly, the Illinois Conference issued Tait a license to preach the Adventist message in the fall of 1881. He was ordained on August 25, 1884, at a camp meeting in Peoria, Illinois, by Isaac D. Van Horn (1834-1910) and Sands H. Lane (1844-1906).⁴

In the meantime, Tait and Agnes Belle Elliott were united in marriage in a ceremony at Onarga on August 8, 1883, with R. F. Andrews officiating. They had one son, Olin William (1887-1932).⁵

Ellen White, like her husband, expressed high regard for Tait. In contrast to those who were resisting the emphasis on “Christ our righteousness” emanating from the 1888 General Conference, Mrs. White wrote that “Brother Tait” was among those who had “been greatly blessed and will give the trumpet a certain sound.”⁶

Publishing Work Leadership in an Era of Conflict

In 1891, after 10 years of ministry in the Illinois Conference, Tait was called to the denominational headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan, where he was appointed to the recently-created position of secretary of the Religious Liberty Association, organized in 1889 to coordinate Adventist advocacy for religious freedom and separation of church and state.⁷ Tait would maintain a strong interest in this topic and cause throughout his forthcoming years as an editor and author.

He assumed an added, and larger, responsibility in 1893 as secretary for the International Tract Society. Early on in his ministry Tait had developed a reputation as a “good financier and manager,”⁸ and in this new role he became involved with the management side of the church’s publishing ministry. A forerunner of the Publishing Department formed after the denominational reorganization of 1901-1903, the Tract Society was the agency for circulating and promoting sales of the vast quantities of literature produced by the church’s two major publishing associations—Review and Herald in Battle Creek and Pacific Press in Oakland, California. Tait was virtually in charge of the society’s day-to-day operations because its president, L. C. Chadwick, was in Europe at the time, and while there departed denominational employment.⁹ In 1895 Tait transferred to the Review and Herald office where he was the first to hold the position of circulation manager.¹⁰

During his years in Battle Creek Tait corresponded frequently with Ellen G. White, then in Australia (1892-1900), regarding his efforts to support General Conference president Ole A. Olsen in an uphill struggle to implement Mrs. White’s counsel regarding the publishing work and church leadership in general.¹¹ The contested issues included fairness in paying royalties to authors, oppressive treatment of workers, overly-aggressive business policies, and centralized control, particularly of the publishing work, in Battle Creek. Wrapped around all of these were deeper spiritual issues of resistance to the Christ-centered revival stirred by the 1888 General Conference and resistance to the testimonies of Ellen White.¹²

Plans to have “the publishing houses all absorbed into the General Conference and all under the control of one Committee” would result in “a gigantic monopoly that would do incalculable harm,” Tait observed in June 1896.¹³ Ellen White’s admonitions eventually had some success in countering such plans, but tensions over the aforementioned issues would continue throughout Tait’s years in Battle Creek and beyond.¹⁴ “The situation in which I am placed here is in many respects a very trying one to me and hence I hardly know what to do many times, that will properly represent my Master and be for the advancement of his work,” Tait wrote to Ellen White in December 1895. The three manuscripts she had just sent him, as well as other documents sent “from time to time,” he said, were “not only a source of great help but of encouragement as well.”¹⁵

Pacific Press, Pacific Union College, and *Signs of the Times*

In December 1897, Tait accepted a call to the editorial department of Pacific Press, then located in Oakland, California. For most of the subsequent 12 years he was an assistant editor of *Signs of the Times*, the press’s flagship periodical, launched by James White in 1874. For “two or three short intervals,” Tait later recalled, his responsibilities shifted to the circulation department.¹⁶

He was called away from his duties at Pacific Press in 1909 when Pacific Union College (PUC), previously located in Healdsburg, relocated to a new campus in Angwin. Tait served as head of the Bible Department but also put his carpentry skills to use in the work of turning the mountain resort property acquired for the school into a college campus. According to Walter Utt’s history of PUC, Tait “set up the sawmill and directed the early logging operations” and at times filled the roles of “stage driver” and “muleskinner.” He was also a “vigorous defender of the college” against those who worried it would be too costly and was “known as an understanding friend of the boys who worked under him.”¹⁷

After two years at PUC, Tait resumed his work as assistant editor of *Signs of the Times*. He was appointed lead editor on November 11, 1913, and held that position until the end of 1936.¹⁸ He rebranded the periodical as “America’s Prophetic Weekly” beginning with the November 25, 1919, issue, broadened to “The World’s Prophetic Weekly” with the November 2, 1926, issue.

Heralds of the Morning and Other Writings

Tait authored only one full-sized book, but it had a large impact. *Heralds of the Morning*, a 358-page work first published in 1899, carried a subtitle that not only characterized the book’s contents but also encapsulated the editorial thrust of *Signs of the Times* throughout his decades-long connection with the periodical: “The Meaning of the Social and Political Problems of To-day and the Significance of the Great Phenomena in Nature.”

Colporteurs experienced good success selling *Heralds* to the public and it became something of a perennial missionary work, providing a substantive introduction to the Adventist understanding of humanity’s destiny in

the light of Bible prophecy. During the first decade of the 20th century it was sometimes advertised along with *The Great Controversy* by Ellen White and *Daniel and the Revelation* by Uriah Smith as one of “three timely books.”¹⁹ The book was translated into German, Swedish, and Danish. New editions came out in 1905, 1906, 1909, 1912, and 1915. Sales surpassed 100,000 by 1914.²⁰

In 2014, Pacific Press brought out a new edition of *Heralds* as part of its Adventist Heritage Library, and more recently several smaller publishers have taken advantage of the expiration of the book’s copyright to issue their own editions. The book is also available in digital form at the Library of Congress website.²¹

In 1920 Tait came out with *Today and Tomorrow*, similar to *Heralds* in content and purpose but, at 102 pages, more compact. He also authored a number of tracts or short books during his first few years at Pacific Press, such as *Wonders of the 19th Century* (1898, 31 pages), a 100-page work on spiritualism entitled *Miracles and Delusions* (1901), and two works decrying militarism and the international arms race—*The Arming of the Nations* (48 pages) and *Alarm of War* (29 pages), both published in 1898 around the outset of the Spanish-American War. The latter sold particularly well—160,000 copies by 1900.²²

Along with his writing, Tait was highly-regarded as a preacher. He traveled to every state of the United States, some of them multiple times, “stirring thousands with his powerful sermons on the prophecies and their fulfillment,” according to Percy T. Magan.²³

Later Years

Agnes Belle Tait supported her husband’s public ministry throughout their 41 years of marriage. Beyond that, she was especially known for her work with Sabbath School and her readiness to help in “any kind of general social welfare work.” She died at home in Mountain View, California, on March 29, 1925, at age 64.²⁴ In 1926, Elder Tait married Ella Niccum Chapman (1871-1969), widow of Edwin A. Chapman. She, too, was active in benevolent work, as evidenced by 50 years as a member and officer in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). She was also credited with founding the first Adventist kindergarten training school, first located at Healdsburg and later in Oakland.²⁵

Though Tait officially retired from full-time service in January 1932, he continued as editor of *Signs* until 1936, while shifting much of the routine duties to others.²⁶ After Arthur S. Maxwell became editor in 1937, Tait remained on the masthead as “editor emeritus.” He and Ella remained in Mountain View, and he remained in apparently good health until April 8, 1941, when, after completing his daily walk he suddenly collapsed and died in front of his home. He was 82.²⁷

Legacy

After entering ministry through the personal influence of James White in the 1880s, Asa Oscar Tait used his skills as a manager and promoter in support of Ellen White's contested influence at church headquarters in Battle Creek during the 1890s. Then, as an editor, author, teacher, and preacher during the first four decades of the 20th century, he helped lead the way in communicating the Adventist message and its meaning for contemporary society.

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NOTES

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2. A.O. Tait Sustentation Fund Application, January 31, 1932, Ella C. Tait and Asa Oscar Tait Sustentation File, Box 9795, RG 33, GCA; "United States Census, 1880."
3. Geo. B. Starr, "James W. Tait obituary," *ARH*, December 24, 1889, 814; Maxwell, "Agnes Belle Tait obituary"; "Illinois Conference," *ARH*, September 6, 1877, 87; P.T. Magan, "Asa Oscar Tait obituary," *ARH*, May 22, 1941, 21.
4. Tait Sustentation Fund Application, January 31, 1932, GCA; Magan, "Asa Oscar Tait obituary."

5. Asa Oscar Tait and Agnes Belle Elliott, August 8, 1883, "Illinois, County Marriages, 1810-1940," *FamilySearch*, accessed November 6, 2023, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KF29-ZWL>; "Asa Oscar Tait," Tait Family Tree, accessed November 6, 2023, Ancestry.com.
6. From a fragment of a letter to Edson White, April 7, 1889, published in *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 292.
7. Magan, "Asa Oscar Tait obituary."
8. A.O. Tait to E.G. White, September 14, 1899, EGWE.
9. A.O. Tait to C.H. Jones, January 21, 1932, Tait Sustentation File, GCA.
10. Magan, "Asa Oscar Tait obituary"; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd rev. edition (1996), s.v. "Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, Department of (PARL)."
11. "Asa Oscar Tait," EGWE, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://ellenwhite.org/people/196>; A.O. Tait Sustentation Fund Application, January 31, 1932, GCA.
12. Letters on these matters sent by Ellen White from Australia to A.O. Tait include: Letter 75 (June 6) and 76 (June 10), 1895; Letter 102A (March 9) and Letter 100 (August 27), 1896. See Ellen G. White Writings, Letters and Manuscripts, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/folders/253>.
13. A.O. Tait to E.G. White, June 18, 1896, EGWE.
14. Donald R. McAdams provides a concise overview of the conflicts over structuring the publishing work in "Jones, Charles Harriman (1850–1936)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=39L0>; see also Gilbert M. Valentine, "Olsen, Ole Andres (1845–1915)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=29WR>.
15. A.O. Tait to E.G. White, December 29, 1895, EGWE.
16. A.O. Tait to C.H. Jones, January 21, 1932, Tait Sustentation File, GCA; Magan, "Asa Oscar Tait obituary."
17. Walter C. Utt, *A Mountain, a Pickax, a College*, 3rd ed. (Angwin, CA: Pacific Union College, 1996), 46, see also 35-41.
18. A.O. Tait to C.H. Jones, January 21, 1932, Tait Sustentation File, GCA; Magan, "Asa Oscar Tait obituary."
19. Advertisement in *Signs of the Times*, May 23, 1906; another example appears in the January 11, 1905, issue.
20. Advertisement, *Signs of the Times*, August 25, 1914.

21. Library of Congress, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/item/12018561/>.
22. A small ad in the *Signs of the Times*, October 24, 1900, touted the “enormous” sales success for *Alarm of War*. Information about Tait’s publications derived from an “Asa Oscar Tait” author search at Google Books (books.google.com).
23. Magan, “Asa Oscar Tait obituary.”
24. Maxwell, “Agnes Belle Tait obituary.”
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27. Magan, “Asa Oscar Tait obituary.”

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