

King, George Albert (1847–1906)

GERMÁN MARTÍNEZ

Germán Martínez, B.A. in Theology (Adventist University of Chile), has been dedicated to the Publishing ministry for more than 25 years. He has served as a colporteur in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and the United States. He has also served the church as director of Publications and Spirit of Prophecy in the Chilean Union. Pastor Martínez is currently the director of Publications and Spirit of Prophecy of the Argentine Union.

George A. King was a pioneer colporteur and tireless promoter of literature evangelism.

Early Years

George Albert King was born in Toronto, Canada, on March 27, 1847. He was raised in a Methodist home, his father being a class leader in the church.¹

In 1867, at the age of 20, George left Canada, intending to stake a claim of land in the western United States. About ten years later, still unsettled, his journeys took him to northern Texas where he was attracted to tent meetings conducted by Dudley M. Canright and Robert M. Kilgore and accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message that they preached. In the spring of 1878, while James and Ellen White were residing in Texas, seeking to develop the Adventist work there, King partnered with Elder White in opening a broom factory in Dallas. Unfortunately, King proved an ineffective business manager despite the help of future cereal magnate Will Keith Kellogg, then a teenager.²

A Turn to Canvassing

King wanted to become a preacher, but because of his hesitant way of speaking and lack of education, James White doubted he had the gift for it. Yet, wanting to give the young man a chance, White asked Richard Godsmark, a farmer who lived near Battle Creek, Michigan, to let King work on the farm for board and room until an opportunity arose for King to gain experience assisting with tent meetings.



George Albert King.

Photo courtesy of Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.

Godsmark encouraged King to practice preaching to the empty chairs in the family home, and then to a live audience made up of the Godsmarks and visiting church friends on a Sabbath afternoon. The trial sermon was a complete disaster. Mrs. Godsmark suggested that George might “preach” more effectively by selling Adventist literature from house to house. Her husband financed the venture with an initial supply of tracts. In his first week, King’s total sales amounted to 62 cents. But he had found his calling—he kept at it, his sales improved, and he found the work rewarding.³

In 1880 King was among a small group of young men trained by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg to canvass Kellogg’s 1,600-page book, *Home Hand Book of Domestic Hygiene and Rational Medicine*. The books were sold “on subscription”—a common marketing practice in the late 19th century—with sales agents going door to door taking orders for later delivery. The book eventually sold hundreds of thousands of copies in several editions through this means.⁴

Marriage

In addition to helping George King find a role in the work of the gospel, the White family appears to have helped him find a wife. On December 3, 1878, while in Texas, Ellen White wrote her son, Willie C. White, informing him that “Brother King” would soon visit him in Battle Creek. “I wish he and Millie Severns, or some other good girl, would strike up a bargain,” she wrote, adding, “There are no real good girls here.”⁵

Two years later, on December 29, 1880, George married Mehitable (“Millie”) Sevrens (1844-1936) in a ceremony officiated by James White in Battle Creek. The couple had three children: Bertha (b. 1882), Nathan (b. 1884), and Maria (b. 1895).⁶

The First Books for Canvassers

King’s success selling Kellogg’s *Home Hand Book* may have helped inspire him with the thought that a large volume setting forth Adventist biblical teachings could be sold with success to the general public on subscription. During the General Conference session convened in December 1881 in Battle Creek, King lobbied the Review and Herald Publishing Association to combine Uriah Smith’s influential books *Thoughts on Daniel* and *Thoughts on the Revelation* into a single volume, *Thoughts on Daniel and the Revelation*, for sale by colporteurs. After experimental copies of already-printed sections of the two books bound together sold well, the publishing house agreed to print 5,000 copies of the combined book in a larger size and enhanced format, including striking illustrations from the prophetic books. As a condition, King had to agree to take responsibility for selling 1,000 copies.⁷

When the first copy rolled off the press on April 3, 1882, King took it to a broom factory in Battle Creek where he was working temporarily and made his first sale to D. W. Reavis for \$2.50. Within four days he had taken orders

for another 25 copies.⁸ It was a key moment in launching a decades-long era in which canvassing subscription books was a prominent feature of Seventh-day Adventist literature evangelism.

Literature Evangelism in the United States and the Caribbean

During the next few years King canvassed far and wide in the United States—including Indiana, Colorado, New Mexico, and several southern states.⁹ He also made presentations on colporteur ministry at Adventist meetings that exerted a powerful influence inspiring others to take up the work.¹⁰

In 1887 King, along with G. E. Rupert, introduced Adventism to British Guiana (now Guyana). King sold books and Rupert led out in meetings leading to establishment of a 40-member congregation in the city of Georgetown that was “the first Adventist Church in the Caribbean.”¹¹ Inability to tolerate the climate forced them to return to the United States after a few months, but not long thereafter King returned for further canvassing in the West Indies. Prior to formal organization of Adventist work in the region, King left “several thousand dollars’ worth of books containing the message.”¹²

After returning from the West Indies, King devoted the remainder of his life to advancing the Adventist cause in greater New York City. Again here he was a pioneer because it was not until the late 1880s that the church established a lasting presence of any kind in the city. Along with canvassing, King’s activities included operating, with Carl Rasmussen, a vegetarian restaurant in Brooklyn that Ellen White visited in November 1901. Five years later, on November 4, 1906, he died of pneumonia in New York at the age of 59.¹³

Contribution

George A. King pioneered the work of Adventist literature evangelists, encouraging the printing of the first book to be sold by canvassers on subscription. He also inspired, recruited and trained hundreds of others for colporteur ministry.

Soon after King’s death, C. H. Edwards, president of the Greater New York Conference and Tract Society, paid tribute to him in a letter to Ellen White:

For thirty years he has carried the printed page to the people. Shortly before his death he told me that he had personally put at least \$25,000 worth of our literature into the hands of the people. We have no one to take his place He has barely known what it was to take a day’s vacation for years, and now his work is done. Others must gird on the armor and press the battle on to the final victory.¹⁴

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NOTES

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8. Schwarz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 149.
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10. See for example King's impact on William Arnold, a pioneer missionary in the Caribbean islands, in Glenn O. Phillips, "Arnold, William (1854–1922)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, September 18, 2021, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=FI26>.
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