

The History and Uncertain Future of Ellen White's Autographs

By Ronald D. Graybill

I'm using the term "autograph" to refer to a document in the handwriting of its author. In the scholarly editing of historical documents, these handwritten documents are usually called "holographs," but that term is being used more and more frequently for digital 3D images.

Thousands of pages of Ellen White's autographs are securely stored in the vault of the Ellen White Estate in Silver Spring, Maryland. If you should find yourself in Silver Spring and want to view one or two specific pages, you would probably be allowed to do so. However, if you want to make a systematic study of a large number of Ellen White's handwritten documents, I have reason to believe that some of you, at least, might be denied the privilege.

While there may be difficulties in getting access to the handwritten documents (not to mention the \$400 air fare from Dallas to DC), the White Estate has made enormous strides in recent years to facilitate scholarship. They have published online, and in searchable form, virtually all of Ellen White's letters and manuscripts. These are the edited, polished, versions of her letters and manuscripts, not facsimiles of the original handwriting or

literal transcriptions thereof. Still, within these newly accessible 50,000 pages, one can now find, in seconds, any word, phrase, or combination of words. Already online were all her published writings. One can now isolate a search to those writings created or published during her lifetime, or one can search within a particular decade, year, or document.

Many different literary assistants prepared the transcriptions we now find online. During Ellen White's lifetime, she approved these transcriptions. In the first volume of Ellen White's annotated letters and manuscripts, these are referred to as "expanded" transcriptions. A better descriptions might be "improved" or even "condensed" transcriptions. Spelling and grammar are improved, and Ellen White's secretaries deleted what they deemed to be "needless repetition," thus actually condensing the original documents.

The purpose of my remarks today is to affirm that it is worthwhile to study Ellen White's autographs. For one thing, I believe readers should be able to judge for themselves whether a passage is *needlessly* repetitive. And even if it is, it may be significant that Ellen White repeated a thought over and over. What may have seemed needlessly repetitive to a secretary 130 years ago, may seem more significant today.

The ability to transcribe, or even to read, an original Ellen White autograph takes some practice. Even

the experts who transcribed many of Ellen White's documents after her death declared various words and phrases illegible.

Despite her limited education, Ellen White was capable of writing in a clearly readable hand. But once she had a staff of literary assistants familiar with her chirography (handwriting as opposed to typography) she did not take the time to be overly neat. If she sent a letter to a friend in her own handwriting, she might ask the friend to excuse her "miserable scribbling."

I contend that the handwritten autographs contain historical, factual, even theological evidence that is not found in the official polished versions of those documents. In other words, evidence is "lost in transcription." Indeed, in my forthcoming book, *Visions and Revisions: A Textual History of Ellen White's Writings*, I've titled one chapter "Lost in Transcription." My paper today is a condensation of that chapter.¹

Even without gaining access to Ellen White's handwritten originals, one can get some sense of what can be learned from them because in more than 100 cases, variant readings of the same document are online. That is, some documents have been transcribed more

¹ The book includes chapters on the revisions of the first vision, the editing of the Testimonies, and *The Great Controversy* revisions as well as a chapter on literary borrowing, another on the work of the literary assistants and their relationships with Ellen White and each other. Finally there is a chapter on the controversy over the *The Great Hope*, a condensation of *The Great Controversy* prepared for mass mailing.

than once, doubtless by different editors, and both of their transcriptions are online.

Take, for example, Manuscripts 55 and 55a, 1910, both of which are based on the same essay about true conversion. Manuscript 55 has Mrs. White saying that some wrongly expect that during conversion they will be overpowered by “some irresistible force, over which they have no control.”

But when we look carefully at the handwritten original, we find that Manuscript 55a is more faithful to it because Mrs. White actually wrote that these folks expect conversion to involve an “irresistible power over which they had no control—to affect their physical strength.” The words “physical strength” are in Ellen White’s hand and are correctly transcribed in Manuscript 55a. But those words are lost in the variant transcription labeled Manuscript 55.

This explicit reference to “physical strength,” evokes the ecstatic religious exercises of Ellen White and her fellow believers in the early days of the Advent movement when they often “lost strength” or were “slain by the Spirit.”

Ellen White’s own twin sister, Elizabeth, may have been one who had this erroneous view of conversion. She was not an infidel but she said “I try as hard as any one but as to get the feeling . . . it is impossible. . . . I cannot make pretensions that I don’t feel.” Apparently Elizabeth

equated conversion to that irresistible power affecting *physical strength* she had felt at those early Methodist camp meetings.

This next example does not involve a variant reading, but a simple transcription error. In a letter to Kellogg in 1898 (Lt1860), Ellen White wrote that she was feeling quite well and not experiencing any “physical prostration.” Whoever transcribed the letter wrote that she was not experiencing any “nervous prostration.” A trivial mistake, to be sure, but one which shows that Ellen White’s written words can be lost in transcription.

I have meticulously transcribed more than 250 pages of Ellen White autographs. When I transcribe these I seek to represent, in type, as exactly as possible, what she penned on paper. I place the facsimile of the handwriting in the left column, and my typed transcription opposite it on the right. My transcriptions are line for line, word for word. If Ellen White violated the rules of grammar, I still show her exact words in their exact order. If she cancelled a word, I represent it as being struck through. If she interlined a word or phrase, I represent it as superscript. I do not insert punctuation where she had none (and she often had none, not even periods). If I can discern her spelling, I represent it exactly. She didn’t care much about spelling. She spelled phonetically, and made little effort over the years to learn

to spell better. She constantly spelled “sanitarium,” by inserting an “a” where the first “i” should be. She must have seen the word corrected hundreds of times in the typescripts her secretaries handed back to her. She made the opposite mistake with the word “character,” inserting an “i” in the middle where the second “a” should be.

I thoroughly enjoy making literal transcriptions, but try as I might, I sometimes fail to transcribe Ellen White’s handwriting perfectly. I have a conservative and delightfully obsessive friend, Kevin Morgan. When he checks my work, he sometimes sees details I have missed. Textual criticism, for such this is, is a field where conservative and liberal scholars can work together harmoniously.

I have a considerable collection of photocopies of Ellen White autographs left over from my work at the White Estate in the 1970s and 80s. Materials *unpublished* before 1979 are only protected by copyright for 75 years after the author’s death, and it’s now been over 100 years since Ellen White died. This means it is possible that although the White Estate has the legal possession of the paper on which of Ellen White’s autographs were written, they hold no copyright on the words or images of most of those copies.

Kevin Morgan and I have located over 200 pages of Ellen White autographs which have been published in facsimile form over the years. These have appeared in

books, journals, and research papers. We have also copied and are transcribing those documents on public display in research centers, museums, and Adventist historical sites.

In my forthcoming book, I will have a great deal more insights into her writings and how they were altered over the years. In that book, I comment on another value of studying her autographs for “Despite the flaws in Ellen White’s handwritten letters and manuscripts, or perhaps because of those flaws, there is a delightful, insightful experience that comes from the reading and carefully transcribing Ellen White’s handwriting for oneself. The sense of immediacy is palpable. The scent of authenticity is a fragrance never whiffed when reading the polished, published versions set forth in neat, uniform lines of identical type.”

The editors of the first annotated volume of Ellen White’s letters and manuscripts used the edited versions of those documents. They did not want to burden the general reader with the “distractions of grammatical imperfections and transcription apparatus.” Fair enough, all they need to do now is publish, online, the high-quality color digital facsimiles of the original handwritten documents they used in the book.

The study of the original autographs uncovers many nuances lost in transcription. Mrs. White originally wrote how pained she was by the superficial conversions of

those who claim to be Christians, but in her own handwriting, she interlined the words "many of." So she edited herself so as not to stereotype all Christians. She was pained by the superficial conversions of "many of those" who claim to be Christian.

As you probably know, we have those among us who now argue that we should go back to our church's earlier anti-trinitarian views. They note that in the official online transcription of a statement about the subject, Mrs. White refers to the "persons" of the Godhead. But in her autograph, she clearly modified the word "persons" to be "personalities." She apparently used the two words interchangeably, but readers who think otherwise have been able to use this passage in the autograph to argue their theological point.

As the chapter in my book on Ellen White's autographs was evaluated, one reader suspected that I used examples about her dietary practices to emphasize her weakness for meat eating in her middle age. Not so, I argue. It was her very weakness for occasional meat eating that created the transcription problems in her secretary's work.

In one passage, she mentioned eating "suet," a hard fat form of meat. The word "suet," which I see spelled phonetically as "suit" i.e. "sue-it," is declared "illegible" in the official transcription. True, it is a bit difficult to read, so the secretary may have been relieved

to simply label it illegible, and not have to admit that Ellen White ate a little meat.

Consider another transcription anomaly involving diet. As she travelled by train across the country in 1880, she twice enjoyed a soup or broth made from “pressed chicken.” She even wrote her husband James to tell him how to prepared it. But when the letter was adapted for publication in the *Review* all mention of her diet was omitted and instead, travelers were admonished to practice “strict temperance in all things. Take your lunch-baskets with you, well filled with fruits and plainly cooked bread.” But we do have two different transcriptions of the actual “pressed chicken” letter each of them has one of the two mentions of of pressed chicken in the autograph.

During the 1950s and 1960s, in preparation for the writing of the biography of Ellen White, hundreds of pages of previously untranscribed letters and diaries were copied under the supervision of Arthur White. Unaware that Adventist thinking on clean and unclean meats had been slow in developing, he had a problem when he saw that Ellen White had asked her son to purchase some “oysters.” He left the passage out of the typescript without ellipsis. In the 1970s, when several of us on the staff complained, the lost oysters were restored to the transcript, and they’re online today.

The White Estate need not fear that releasing all the autographs will have some negative impact on the church or the reputation of Ellen White. Probably the most problematic and embarrassing textual problem has been published for many years, but has gained little notice and had no impact. I refer to the backdated diary entries about the Salamanca vision. Ellen White had a vision in Salamanca, New York, in November of 1890. She later created diary entries and dated them in November, 1890, which described, in some detail, a controversial meeting which did not take place until March of 1891. We do not know what was in Ellen White's mind or what she intended when she created these backdated entries, but there is abundant evidence that they were not written before the events they described even though the dates she assigned to them made it appear so. Whether Ellen White intended to deceive cannot be known. But that the backdated documents have deceived their readers cannot be denied. Even after seeing the evidence, Arthur White continued to insist in the biography of Ellen White that she described future events in detail before they occurred, and accepting his account, the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* comes close to perpetuating that myth.

I seriously doubt that there are any textual problems in Ellen White's autographs more grave than this one. My point is that Robert Olson published

facsimiles of all the autographs involved in the Salamanca story back in the 1980s with no apparent negative consequences.

To string all these anomalies together might give a distorted view of what might be uncovered in a careful, systematic study of Ellen White's autographs. In my transcription work I have found a few instances where something significant was lost in earlier transcriptions. But there are thousands of other pages which have not been available for convenient study by scholars. I suspect they will contain few more surprises, but even where they don't they can enrich our understand of Ellen White, her writing practices, and even of her message.

So what is the future of the Ellen White autographs? It is impossible to say. I suspect that if a scholar with solid conservative credentials had the money to travel to Silver Spring and requested to study them systematically, he or she might be granted permission. Perhaps as the annotation project moves forward, Tim Poirier and Denis Kaiser would be willing to submit facsimiles of the documents to scholars outside their circle for careful transcription so that they could include footnotes on textual variants. Simple as a matter of sound archival practice all the autographs need to be scanned with high resolution color scanning. Then these scans could be placed on secure computers in the nearly two dozen E. G. White Research Centers around the world.

Beyond that, I think it will be a long time before all the handwritten materials are available online for convenient study. Indeed, the current policies may never change.