

## **Little Man, Long Shadow: The Legacy of J. N. Loughborough**

In the late-1840s John Norton Loughborough was nicknamed “the boy preacher”; later in the 1850s he was called “the little preacher.” Loughborough never grew taller than 5’4” and never weighed more than 125 pounds. In truth, he was a little man, but one who cast a long shadow. When he died in 1924 at age 92, he was revered by Seventh-day Adventists as “the last of the pioneers.”

This term is appropriate for the man who had pioneered Adventist evangelism in the Midwest in 1853, California in 1868, and the British Isles in 1879. In addition, he sent the first boxes of tracts to Pitcairn Island and Haiti in the 1870s and helped launch the ship *Pitcairn* in 1890 which led to the conversion of the entire island. His preaching tours across Europe, Australasia, and Africa between 1896 and 1910 greatly strengthened Adventist mission work and institutions.

Although he teamed up with many evangelists and tent masters, Loughborough developed his own unique style of doing evangelism. Rather than pass the offering plate during his meetings, he crafted wooden contribution boxes which he nailed to the pulpits in his tents to receive voluntary offerings, which usually exceeded his expenses. During the Civil War, he demonstrated his patriotism by flying the American flag from the center pole, by praying with Union soldiers passing through, and by allowing the army brass to use his tent for recruitment during the day (after which they guarded it by night). While most Adventist preachers focused on Bible prophecies as indicators of the nearness of Christ’s coming, Loughborough created several full-color charts showing the “Wonders in the Heavens” (bizarre celestial signs) that proved the Second Advent was near at hand. When electricity became available, he created lighted transparency signs to advertise his meetings in Oakland and San Francisco. Likewise,

despite the reservations of some church leaders, he remained firmly convinced that faith healings (following James 1:5) were the work of the Holy Spirit. As a boy during the Millerite Movement, he had witnessed miraculous healings. He saw pioneers instantly restored to health in response to prayers and anointing in New York, Michigan, Wisconsin, and California in the 1850s and '60s. He and A. T. Jones participated in at least two faith healing services (one at Mt. Vernon, Ohio, the other at Decatur, Illinois in 1891), in which John described the instant healing of dozens of individuals as “a green spot in the heavenly journey” and “the nearest approach to a Pentecostal outpouring of the spirit of God [that] I have witnessed since 1844.”<sup>1</sup>

Loughborough also pioneered many organizational innovations in the church's history. In the 1860s, he played key roles in selecting the official name, incorporating the Review & Herald Publishing Association, organizing scores of local churches (he wrote the covenant they followed), forming the General Conference, writing state conference constitutions, editing the first health journal (*The Health Reformer*), and convening the first Seventh-day Adventist camp meeting in Pilot Grove, Iowa, in 1866 at the height of the Snook and Brinkerhoff defection.

During his 70-year career, he was elected president of at least fourteen different Adventist entities and filled many other administrative positions, in many of which he was the pioneer official. In the 1860s he was Michigan Conference president, a General Conference Executive Committee member, and president of the Health Reform Institute in Battle Creek. In the 1870s he served as California Conference president, editor of the *Signs of the Times*, president of the Pacific SDA Publishing Association, president of the California Tract and Missionary Society, president of the California Sabbath School Association, and president of the North Pacific Conference. In the 1880s he became president of the British Tract and Missionary Society, president of St. Helena Sanitarium, and served on the board of Healdsburg College

(later PUC). In the 1890s he became in turn president of the Nebraska and Illinois conferences, superintendent of two multi-state districts stretching across America's Midwest and Southwest, while also serving on the General Conference Foreign Mission Board, the International Tract and Missionary Society, the SDA Education Society, the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association, and the SDA Publishing Association. Even after he officially retired in 1897, Loughborough helped reorganize the General Conference in 1901 and 1903, form the British Union Conference in 1902 and the Pacific Union in 1906, and he served as the assistant pastor of the Oakland Church well into his seventies.

Loughborough should also be remembered for pioneering many famous "firsts" in Adventist history. In the 1850s he was the first to use tents for evangelistic meetings; the first to sell Adventist tracts to the public; the first to keep Sabbaths from sundown to sundown; the first to suggest a tithing plan known as Systematic Benevolence. In the 1860s he was first to persuade Michigan's Governor Blair to grant Adventist men noncombatant status during the Civil War; first to advertise public meetings in local newspapers; the church's first fundraiser for its first sanitarium; and he—not Dr. Kellogg—wrote its first medical book (*Hand Book of Health*). In the 1870s Loughborough pioneered gospel efforts in San Francisco using methods that a later generation would call "saturation evangelism"; he started a successful ship ministry and Biblical Institutes; and he created an early recipe for Communion bread (adapted from Jewish unleavened bread), and he persuaded West Coast members to substitute grape juice for wine. In the 1880s he drew up the first ministerial reading lists; held the first workers' meetings one week prior to camp meetings; and pioneered the children's story time at worship services. In the 1890s he led in establishing the first inner-city missions, the Chicago Bible School, canvassers' and teachers' institutes.

On the other hand, he also pioneered several practices that have fallen by the wayside. In 1908 John, then 76, popularized the Birthday Thank Offering. He actually gave separate offerings each year to mark his birthday and his conversion day. Although he never earned over fifteen dollars a week, Loughborough also gave a second tithe. According to his diaries, he even tithed the gifts people gave him and the value of the hospitality (lodging and food) extended to him in his travels! Yet his cash balances always came out in the black. Beginning at age nineteen, he read his Bible completely through 76 times (more than any other pioneer)—and this inspired the General Conference Missionary Volunteer Department to form the Loughborough League in 1952 on the centennial of his conversion to Sabbatarian Adventism. But he not only read the Bible through, he also created a list of the 3,573 divine promises in God’s Word as he read—a list that Elder Glen Coon would later incorporate into his revivalist preaching in the 1970s. Near the end of his life, Loughborough also compiled lists of more than 100 of Ellen White’s fulfilled predictions; unfortunately, these were never published and are no longer extant.

During his ministry, John and his family followed several practices that would not become the norm among Seventh-day Adventists for generations to come. At a time when most Adventists rejected Christmas as a pagan practice, both in England and after their return to California in the 1880s, John and Annie and their children Mary and Delmer celebrated the Yuletide by inviting friends in for a lavish dinner, a decorated tree, the exchange of brightly wrapped gifts, and carols in the parlor as Delmer played the harmonium. While many Adventist leaders (like A. T. Jones) strongly opposed members’ involvement in politics, Loughborough’s diaries reveal that he regularly voted in local, state, and national elections. Likewise in the 1890s, Loughborough ordained both female elders and deaconesses on the West Coast. In addition, by voice and pen, he supported the preaching ministry of such outstanding women as

Sarah A. H. Lindsey, Angelina Cornell, Lulu Wightman, Ida Higbie, L. Flora Plummer, and Sarepta Myrenda Irish Henry (whom he dubbed “Our Lady Henry”).

Loughborough also deserves to be remembered as a pioneer in advancing Adventist music. Trained in choral singing as a boy, he served on the General Conference Hymnbook Committee in the 1860s that developed the church’s earliest song books. In the 1870s he sponsored singing lessons for California’s Sabbath school leaders, convened quarterly music conferences, urged local churches to install pump organs, encouraged children’s choirs to sing at camp meetings, and was the first to print musical scores on one side of his evangelistic handbills with sermon outlines on the other side. Against some opposition, Loughborough brought organs and harmoniums into camp meeting tents and public halls wherever he preached. In 1885 Pacific Press published his collection of “spiritual songs” as a new songbook.

In addition to promoting musical harmony, Loughborough’s successful encounters with fanatics, dissidents, and false prophets throughout his career brought spiritual harmony to the church. In the 1850s he helped to combat H. S. Case and C. P. Russell’s “Age to Come” fanaticism and Gilbert Cranmer’s attacks on the Whites in Michigan as well as J. M. Stephenson and D. P. Hall’s Messenger Party defection in Wisconsin. In the 1860s he helped to defeat fanaticism in Maine and B. F. Snook and W. H. Brinkerhoff’s apostasy in Iowa. During the 1870s he successfully used public church trials to defeat defections in California, Oregon, and Washington. By voice and pen he combatted false prophets like Anna Garmire, Anna Phillips, and Margaret Rowen and publicly debated dissidents like Dudley M. Canright, A. T. Jones, and E. S. Ballenger even during his retirement years. Probably his greatest contribution to church unity, however, appeared in 1907 with the publication of his book *The Church: Its Organization, Order and Discipline*. *The Church* was arguably the most significant policy book ever produced

until J. L. McElhany's *Church Manual* appeared in 1931. For decades this unofficial manual served as the final word on such issues as the duties of officers and committees, church finances, legal incorporation, forming congregations and conferences, numerical representation, and answers to frequently asked questions. In fact, the organization of the later *Church Manual* clearly shows that McElhany followed Loughborough's book quite closely.

The future church leaders Loughborough converted or trained constitute yet another significant legacy of his 70-year ministry. Throughout his career he kept a "book of converts," a written record of those he had baptized.<sup>2</sup> In the 1850s he converted John Matteson (future missionary to Scandinavia), Moses Hull (his future preaching partner in New England), George I. Butler (a future General Conference president), and Nathan Fuller (a future New York-Pennsylvania Conference president). For the 1870s his converts included William Healey (a future missionary to Hawaii and North Pacific Union Conference president) and Charles Kinney (the first ordained Black pastor who worked successfully in the South). In the 1890s Loughborough ordained Louis Sheafe (an outstanding Black evangelist in the West and South). After his retirement, Loughborough converted J. L. McElhany, another future General Conference president (1936-1950).

Above all, J. N. Loughborough deserves to be remembered as the preeminent historian (or chronicler) of Adventist history. Not only did he personally know most of the church's pioneer workers; not only did he participate in many of the watershed events that shaped the church's future; but his historical interpretation of those events also shaped Adventists' views of the past for more than a century. His autobiographical articles in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, the *Youth's Instructor*, and the *Pacific Union Recorder*, and his path-breaking books *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists* (1892) and *The Great Second Advent Movement*

(1905) created an apologetic style of writing Adventist history that his disciples Arthur W. Spalding, Le Roy Edwin Froom, and F. M. Wilcox followed. Not until the rise of a new generation of professionally trained historians in the 1970s would church scholars probe the Adventist past with a greater degree of skepticism and objectivity. Until then, however, pastors, teachers, and church officials continued to write history “the Loughborough way,” emphasizing primarily the divinely led, progressive, inspiring stories of the past.

During his retirement years, he also helped to shape future generations’ views of Ellen White by compiling extensive indexes to all her published books and *Review and Herald* articles, by drawing up lists of over 100 of her fulfilled predictions, and by sharing fascinating stories about her life and the physical signs while she was in vision (Loughborough claimed to have seen her in vision between 40 and 50 times). Far more than any other pioneer—including Ellen’s husband James and her sons Edson and Willie—Loughborough’s meticulous accounts of her behavior while in vision would shape church members’ views of the Spirit of Prophecy for nearly a century.

Consequently, even before his death, a grateful church began to erect what Joseph Bates once called “waymarks and high heaps” to commemorate Loughborough’s contributions. In 1897, J. E. Fulton, missionary to the Fiji Islands, christened his newest boat *The Loughborough* out of gratitude for John’s support of Pacific missions. For nearly half a century, the General Conference Missionary Volunteer Department made his 1905 book *Great Second Advent Movement* required reading; those who wanted to earn the coveted Standard of Attainment Award in Adventist History had to take a detailed examination over its content. In 1926, Pacific Union College established a Loughborough Museum with 35 artifacts that had once been his. His annual Bible study habits inspired Theodore Lucas and the General Conference to establish

the Loughborough League in 1952 to encourage Adventist youth to read their Bibles regularly. Within a few years the League inspired the rise of the Loughborough Bible Quiz Program, the Legion of Honor, and Ella Robinson's *Lighter of Gospel Fires* (1955), a popular biography of Loughborough's childhood and youth.

Homage to Loughborough's memory reached a peak in the 1960s. In 1962 the Greater New York Conference bought a 280-acre country club and renamed it Camp Berkshire. Within a few years, its tiny three- and four-bedroom suites with shared bathrooms were dubbed "loughboroughs." Between 1968 and 1972, Adventists in Merced, California named the road that ran by their church "Loughborough Street"; their new gymnasium, "Loughborough Memorial Auditorium"; and their new elementary school, "The Loughborough Seventh-day Adventist School." Not to be outdone, Adventists in London named their first private black school in 1980 "The John N. Loughborough School." With access to two labs, a library, an assembly hall, a fully equipped cafeteria, and one of the best gymnasiums in north London, its 340 black students wore maroon and white uniforms—Loughborough's favorite colors. Three times as many of its students passed O-level exams in math and twice as many passed O-level exams in English compared with the six nearest comprehensive schools in the city. Doubtless "the little preacher" would be proud of this long-lasting legacy to his memory.

In conclusion, for his evangelistic work in new territories, his outstanding leadership, his creative innovations, his encouragement of music, his combatting fanaticism, his promotion of spirituality, his training of future church leaders, and his interpretation of the past, John Norton Loughborough deserves to be remembered as one of our church's outstanding pioneers. Although in life he was a tiny man, after his death in 1924 he cast a long shadow that continues to shape the Adventist church today.



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ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. N. Loughborough, *Review and Herald*, September 1, 1891, pp. 552-53; September 15, 1891, p. 571; October 6, 1891, p. 619; October 13, 1891, pp. 636-37; Diary, August 1891.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, none of these “books of converts” are currently extant in the Loughborough Collection at the Center for Adventist Research in James White Library at Andrews University.