



Helping Adventists find their roots thru discernment of truth and error

Marian Davis – 1847- 1904

Marian Davis served as a copyist, bookmaker and literary assistant to Ellen G. White for 25 years, from 1879 until her death from tuberculosis in 1904. She accompanied Mrs. White in her travels in America, in Europe, and Australia.

W. K. Kellogg, the cereal maker, was married to Marian's sister, Ella. The Davis family were raised Seventh-Day Baptist (Trinitarians). In the early 1880s Marian helped to prepare for publication Testimonies for the Church, volumes 1-4. After she joined Ellen White in Europe in 1886, she assisted in the preparation of The Great Controversy (1888 edition). She also assisted with Patriarchs and Prophets.

During her years in Australia, Marian was the one who worked most closely with Ellen White on The Desire of Ages. Ellen White did not simply sit down and write the manuscript for The Desire of Ages as one would normally write a book. Rather, Marian assisted by selecting and compiling material on the life of Christ that Ellen White had previously written in letters, manuscripts, articles, and books. Mrs. White filled in gaps and expanded the narrative with further details as needed.

Describing Marian's work, Ellen White wrote: "She does her work in this way: She takes my articles which are published in the papers, and pastes them in blank books. She also has a copy of all the letters I write. In preparing a chapter for a book, Marian remembers that I have written something on that special point, which may make the matter more forcible. She begins to search for this, and if when she finds it, she sees that it will make the chapter more clear, she adds it. The books are not Marian's productions, but my own, gathered from all my writings."

— Letter 61a, 1900 (EGW Biography, vol. 4, p. 381).

Though Ellen White had many literary assistants throughout her life, none seemed more highly valued to her than Marian Davis.

Take a look at this: Referring to her involvement with Desire of Ages, Marian Davis provides us with a clear indication of the extensive range of her personal input in the preparation of Ellen White's books.

She writes,

"I see that neither in Brother Jones' letter or yours have I stated definitely what I am doing on the manuscript or why. I have worked for a better opening to the chapters ... The chapters of the old manuscript began too often with some notice of Jesus going here or there, until the book seemed like a diary. [A reference to EGW's original draft] That has been corrected. Then I have tried to begin the chapters and paragraphs with short sentences, and indeed to simplify wherever possible, to drop out every needless word, and to make the work, as I have said, more compact and vigorous." — Letter, Marian Davis to W. C. White, April 11, 1897

In 1910, W. A. Colcord, an associate editor of the Review and Herald, wrote a letter in which he expressed concern that Ellen White's secretaries had placed erroneous interpretations of Scripture into her writings.

"Neither do I think that the comment on Matt. 24:20, found on page 630 of "Desire of Ages" correctly represents the thought of the text. What is said there is true, but I am confident that it is not a correct exposition of the text. We pretty well know how some of these things have found their way into her writings. Her helpers have ransacked our leading works to get hold of what

they thought were the best expositions of Scripture, and woven these things remodeled into the text.” — Letter from W. A. Colcord to L. A. Smith, July 20, 1910, GC Archives

Marian Davis worked for Sister White in her capacity for twenty-five years. Ellen White put a lot of confidence in Marian Davis to do her work faithfully. She was a very hard worker, and labored many times late into the night. She was Ellen White’s most trusted and capable copyist.

Ellen White had this to say about her work:

“She [Marian Davis] is my book-maker. ... She does her work in this way. She takes my articles which are published in the papers, and pastes them in blank books. She also has a copy of all the letters I write. In preparing a chapter for a book, Marian remembers that I have written something on that special point, which may make the matter more forcible. She begins to search for this, and if when she finds it, she sees that it will make the chapter more clear, she adds it.”

— Manuscript Releases, vol. 5 p. 185

She also wrote, “I have done scarcely anything on the life of Christ, and have been obliged to often bring Marian to my help, irrespective of the work on the life of Christ which she has to do under great difficulties, gathering from all my writings a little here and a little there, to arrange as best she can.” — Letter 55, 1894, p. 6.” (Manuscript Release No. 728: How the Desire of Ages was Written, p. 28)

“I feel very thankful for the help of Sister Marian Davis in getting out my books. She gathers materials from my diaries, from my letters, and from the articles published in the papers. I greatly prize her faithful service. She has been with me for twenty five years, and has constantly been gaining increasing ability for the work of classifying and grouping my writings.”—Letter 9, 1903. (Ibid., p. 44)

It is certain that Marian Davis did not write any of Ellen White’s books, but she did have a great deal to do with the way they were laid out. Did Ellen White personally approve of every change that Marian made in the structure of the books? In a personal letter, Ellen White wrote, “Marian will go to him [Willie White] for some little matters that it seems she could settle for herself.... I have had a talk with her and told her she must settle many things herself that she has been bringing Willie.... Every little change of a word she wants us to see. I am about tired of this business.” — Letter 64a, 1889, p. 1.” (Ibid., p. 22)

In the book, *The Desire of Ages*, certain aspects of how the text was to be arranged was left entirely up to Marian Davis to decide.

“As the work [*The Desire of Ages*] was thought to be nearing completion in 1896, Marian, working on the three general introductory chapters, ‘God With Us,’ ‘The Chosen People,’ and ‘The Fullness of the Time,’ sought the counsel of Herbert Lacey of the Avondale school on the arrangement of paragraphs. He was a rather youthful graduate of the classical course (music) offered at Battle Creek College. He made some helpful suggestions in the matter of the sequence of the thoughts presented, which, when it became known, gave birth in later years, when he was known as a seasoned college Bible teacher, to rumors that Lacey had a prominent role in authoring the book. In both oral and written statements he flatly denied such a role.” - DF 508, H. C. Lacey to S. Kaplan, July 24, 1936 (*The Australian Years 1891- 1900*, p. 385)

The Counsel of Lacey and Prescott to Marian Davis

In preparing the final portions of *The Desire of Ages* Marian consulted with Herbert Camden Lacey for advice regarding the arrangement of paragraphs. This caused some to believe that Lacey “had a prominent role in authoring the book.”

It was in this year also that W. W. Prescott proofread the book in its final stages. In June of 1896, after counsel with Lacey and Prescott, Marian “had precious matter to insert” into the book. Ellen White wrote, “In the afternoon Brother and Sister Prescott came. We had a good visit with Sister Prescott. Brother Prescott was with Marian in the interest of the book ‘Life of Christ.’ [*The Desire*

of Ages] He is reading it, for it is the last reading before publication.” — Manuscript 62,1896. (Ibid., p. 387)

Arthur White notes: “So Ellen White and her staff thought; but it did not work out that way. Three or four months later there was more material to be added. Wrote Ellen White on June 1, 1896: ‘In the last discourses reported, Marian has had precious matter to insert, and this has necessitated her obtaining a new set of copies with the addition.’” (Ibid., p. 388)

In a letter written by H. Camden Lacey to Leroy Froom he speaks specifically about this time period. Leroy Froom had written a letter to Lacey asking him about the events in Australia. He wrote, “Dear Brother Lacey:... Elder D. E. Robinson of the White Estate, is under the impression, I believe from something told him by you, that over at Cooranbong around 1898 or 1899 you were giving a series of studies on the Trinity and were challenged by some of the brethren. I think Marian Davis was present at that time,...” - Letter written by Leroy Froom to Herbert Camden Lacey on August 8, 1945

Lacey replied at length on August 30, 1945: “Dear Brother Froom:... Well, that was not quite the angle in which I was involved in the studies conducted at Cooranbong way back in 1896. At that time, Professor Prescott was tremendously interested in presenting Christ as the great ‘I AM’ of Exodus 3:14, which of course was Christ the Second Person of the Godhead, with the statement of Jesus in John 8:58, which we all agreed to; but then linked it up also with other ‘I am’s’ in that Gospel—7 of them, such as ‘I am the Bread of Life’ ‘I am the Light of the World’ ‘I am the Door of the Sheep’ etc. all very rich in their spiritual teaching—but which those latter cases is merely the copula in the Greek, as well as in the English. But he insisted on his interpretation. Sr. Marian Davis seemed to fall for it, and lo and behold, when the ‘Desire of Ages’ came out, there appeared that identical teaching on pages 24 and 25, which, I think, can be looked for in vain in any of Sr. White’s published works prior to that time!”

Lacey indicates that Marian Davis not only used Ellen White’s writings, but she had a free hand in making use of other sources also.

“In this connection, of course you know that Sr. Marian Davis was entrusted with the preparation of ‘Desire of Ages’ and that she gathered her material from every available source—from Sr. White’s books already in print, from unpublished manuscripts, from private letters, stenographical reports of her talks, etc.—but perhaps you may not know that she (Sr. Davis) was greatly worried about finding material suitable for the first chapter. She appealed to me personally many times as she was arranging that chapter (and other chapters too for that matter) and I did what I could to help her; and I have good reason to believe that she also appealed to Professor Prescott frequently for similar aid, and got it too in far richer and more abundant measure than I could render....

This is a continuation of material from the Letter by Herbert Camden Lacey to Leroy Froom on August 30, 1945:

“Professor Prescott’s interest in the ‘Eternity of the Son,’ and the great ‘I AM’S’ coupled with the constant help he gave Sister Davis in her preparation of the ‘Desire of Ages,’ may serve to explain the inclusions of the above-named teachings in that wonderful book.... “I have always known that... our people undoubtedly generally followed that view [non-trinitarian]. But we [the Lacey’s], as a family, had been brought up in the Church of England, and were naturally, may I say, Trinitarians. We just believed it, subconsciously, and I do not remember our ever discussing the question with the brethren who brought us into the Truth, Elder M. C. Israel, and young brother W. L. H. Baker. One thing I do recall is my mother’s remarking on the strange language used by our ministers in speaking of the Holy Ghost as ‘it’ and ‘its’ as though they thought of the Holy Spirit as an influence, instead of as a Person. That seemed very strange to her, and in a measure to me also (I was about 17 then).

“Now this bring[s] me to the second point in my letter; The angle in which I was involved in that convention at Cooranbong was not the Eternity of the Son, but the Personality of the Holy Ghost. Perhaps a few words of historic background may be helpful here: As I already stated, I was really a Trinitarian at heart. And I went through Healdsburg College, and Battle Creek College, with a

dim sort of a feeling that there was something wrong about our teaching on the Ministry and Personality of the Holy Ghost. (Of course, that term was never used, except in reading from the Bible,—it was always ‘Holy Spirit’ and referred to as ‘it.’)

“And then in the Testimonies I noticed that, practically everywhere, the same language was used, — ‘Holy Spirit’ ‘it’ ‘its’ etc., as though the ‘Spirit of God’ were an influence, instead of a Person, the Third Person of the Godhead.... “On the voyage back to Australia during September 1895, I made that theme, the Personality and Work of the Holy Ghost, a special subject of Bible study. And I became convinced for myself! So when I was asked to conduct a series of Bible Studies at the 9:00 o’clock hour in a convention in Cooranbong in 1896, I presented that theme very much to the interest (I well remember!) of Sr. Marian Davis, who took copious notes, and also to that of Elder A. G. Daniells, who was frequently present and expressed conservative appreciation.

“When the ‘Desire of Ages’ came out in 1898, Brother Daniells himself called my attention to the expression found on page 671, where the Spirit is spoken of as ‘the third person of the Godhead’ (I had not at that time seen a printed copy) and made some kindly comments.... “In this same connection I was interested to note the language used in the article ‘The Holy Spirit in our Schools’ found in 8T. 61, 62, and bearing [the] date ‘May 10, 1896’ Cooranbong N. S. W., where every time the Holy Spirit is referred to, the pronouns ‘He,’ ‘Him,’ ‘His’ are employed. And He is called a ‘heavenly messenger’ ‘The heavenly guest’ repeatedly, and apparently ‘the great Teacher Himself.’ ” - Letter by Herbert Camden Lacey to Leroy Froom on August 30, 1945

It is apparent that W. W. Prescott and Camden Lacey had some significant influence upon Marian Davis while she was preparing The Desire of Ages. Both of these men were Trinitarians at this time, and it is obvious that the counsel Marian Davis received from them was pro-Trinitarian. And she came from a Seventh-Day Baptist upbringing, which is Trinitarian as well. Up to this time Marian Davis was very careful to present the Testimonies as they had been given by the Lord. Yet here it seems that she was influenced by Lacey and Prescott to make minor changes so that it appeared as if Ellen White was teaching the Trinitarian doctrine. You could say they did this on purpose. But you could also say they were simply sharing what and how “they” believed. Either way, it’s an alteration of what would have been original content.