

WILLIAM G.
JOHNSSON

Embrace the IMPOSSIBLE

It's the Story of the Bible.

It's the Story of the
Seventh-day Adventist Church.

And It's My Story.

Copyright © 2008 by Review and Herald® Publishing Association

Published by Review and Herald® Publishing Association, Hagerstown, MD 21741-1119

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other), except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Review and Herald® titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, e-mail SpecialMarkets@reviewandherald.com.

The Review and Herald® Publishing Association publishes biblically based materials for spiritual, physical, and mental growth and Christian discipleship.

The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy of all facts and quotations as cited in this book.

Unless otherwise noted, all texts are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Texts credited to NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Bible texts credited to NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.

This book was
Edited by Penny Estes Wheeler
Cover designed by Trent Truman
Cover art by Joel D. Springer
Interior Design by Tina M. Ivany
Typeset: Bembo 12/15

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

13 12 11 10 09

1 2 3 4 5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnsson, William G., 1934- .

Embrace the impossible: it's the story of the Bible. It's the story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and it's my story / William G. Johnsson.

p. cm.

1. Johnsson, William G., 1934- 2. Seventh-Day Adventists—Biography. I. Title.

BX6193.J635A3 2008

286.7092—dc22

[B]

2008031882

ISBN 978-0-8280-2355-9

To those intrepid men and women who
slogged and dreamed along with me
in the *Review* office 1982-2006:

Rachel (who typed this manuscript) and Roy,
Bill and Bonita
Carlos and Kimberly
Steve and Merle, Myron and Myrna
Ella, Aileen, and Andy, Jean and Jeanne
Jocey and Jim, Gene and George

Plus:

Chitra and Corinne
Jackie, Kit, and Debbie
Ruth, Mary, and Nicole

Viva la compagne!

Contents

Preface

I. The Impossible

1. The Boy in the Biggin

II. The Road to Washington

2. Follow the Gleam
3. The Road Less Traveled
4. Greetings From Southern Asia
5. Under the Indian Sun
6. Camelot

III. In the Cockpit

7. The Little Paper
8. Three Presidents, Three Bosses
9. FDR
10. Contending for the Faith
11. Women in Ministry
12. The Swelling of Jordan
13. Conversations With Other Churches
14. Reinventing the *Review*
15. Embracing the Impossible

IV. Home Again

16. And the Story Goes On

Preface

One day as I approached the close of my long tenure as editor of the *Adventist Review*, I felt a strange sensation come over me. It was as though I had been away for 20 years and had come home.

It was a long journey. Not 20 years but 25, a quarter century of intense, focused, demanding but ultimately blessed service in the cockpit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. My unique responsibilities made me a confidant of three General Conference presidents, to whom I reported directly. It put me on committees and commissions, made me both participant and chronicler of events that shaped the worldwide Adventist movement.

I was there when one of my bosses faced the most crushing blow of his long, distinguished career. I was there when another went through a huge personal crisis that threatened the church at large. I was there when the role of women in ministry was discussed and debated, when decisions were taken that left some members elated and others deflated. I was there when theological issues hung over the church, when administrative mistakes made many angry and disillusioned.

I was there. I saw, I heard, I wrote. And I spoke. I cast my vote.

But it was more than a quarter century of turbulence and sharp turns. It was a time of unprecedented progress and growth as the church I love morphed into a global community with increasing impact on society. For the Lord was *in* the church and *with* the church—of this I am 100 percent sure. Through the struggles and disappointments, through the threats and challenges, in the incredible expansion in numbers and in the growing corporate likeness into the image of Christ—God was there.

I have come home now. And before the scenes of those 25 years—years of privilege, years of hard work that taxed me to the limits of my personal reserves and beyond, but years of deep satisfac-

tion and fulfillment—begin to fade, it's time to share them with the church. I believe strongly that the church is for all, not just for those in leadership. I believe in the right of all members to know what is happening without distortion or evasion. So I will tell the story of those 25 years as I saw it.

However, don't look for a "kiss and tell" book, an exposé. I have low regard for those individuals who, granted access to the inner circles of an organization, sell their soul for fame or filthy lucre. Some matters, some details, will remain with me, as they should. And while I hope and pray that this memoir will be honest and candid, I also want it to be fair and kind. The Lord knows I have plenty of flaws myself. There's no need to try to mask them by pointing up the foibles and failings of those with whom I worked closely.

In several places in the book I employ direct speech in recounting conversations. I have reconstructed these. My account is true to the ideas conveyed, although the actual words may have been different.

This memoir focuses on my quarter-century at church headquarters. It was, I believe, a time that Adventists, more and more, began to embrace the impossible; that dreams turned into reality before their eyes and they saw the working of the Lord who calls into life new things out of nothing.

The story of this book is wider, however. It is also my story, and so, while it is not a full-blown autobiography, it shares how I came to be placed in such a position of high trust and responsibility, and how the story goes on even after I came home.

For my God-blessed life as well as for the church, the story is all about embracing the impossible.



The Impossible

CHAPTER 1

The Boy in the Biggin

With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

—Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:26)

On October 27, 1728, a boy was born in Marton in Yorkshire, England. He would grow up to rewrite the map of the world.

Nothing could have seemed less likely at the boy's birth. He was born in a mud-and-thatch hovel known in those parts as a *biggin*. It had but two small rooms with a dirt floor, and farm animals wandered in and out.

Life expectancy was low. Four siblings perished before the age of 5: Mary, Mary (pathetically named for the deceased sister, but also doomed to die young), Jane, and William. An older brother, John, died at age 23.

The boy's father worked as a day laborer, making the prospects bleak indeed for his surviving son. The boy would not go to school. In fact, public education did not exist. His would be a life of hard-scrabble poverty, always focused on earning enough to put bread on the table. He could not expect to travel or to improve his lot in life. His would be like those of generations before him—narrow, confined, chained by circumstances beyond his making or control.

A day's walk in radius—this would be the extent of his journeys. Like his father, he would follow the well-trod loop between home, field, and church. And when the end came, he would join his parents and siblings in the crowded family grave plot in the churchyard.

That this boy would burst the chains of family and upbringing and become one of the greatest adventurers the world has seen—

EMBRACE THE IMPOSSIBLE

who could have predicted it? That his three epic voyages into realms unknown—into the one third of the earth's surface that lay unexplored; home, it was said, to strange sea creatures and fabulous new lands—would open the world to the modern era of travel, who would be so bold as to give words to the idea?

Impossible.

Yet the boy in the biggin would sail 200,000 miles in small wooden ships—as far as the moon is from earth. He would sail farther and farther south, seeking the fabled continent of *terra australis* that from ancient times had been speculated to exist as a balancing weight to the land mass of Europe. Onward and farther would he press, until he had crossed 70 degrees of latitude and, only 70 miles from Antarctica, endured cold that turned the ship's sails to sheets of lead and the ropes to iron cables. Then, having exploded the myth of the great south continent, he would turn north, sailing further and still further in search of a passage across the top of the world. Ever onward he would journey, into cold and mist and treacherous Alaskan waters that even today test the courage of ships' captains and the mettle of their navigational instruments, until he had crossed 70 degrees north.

Could this child, born without hope or prospect of education, pen a million words in his ships' journal during the seven years of his incredible voyages?

Impossible.

Could he acquire such mathematical skills that the charts he mapped of new lands were so accurate that they still would be used two centuries after his death?

Utterly impossible.

Could the boy in the biggin, born and raised on the lowest rung of England's social ladder, who married a woman likewise of low standing—daughter of a dockside tavern keeper—rise to membership in the Royal Society, reserved for the country's intellectual elite?

Nonsense. Only in dreams and novels can fantasies like these be given a hearing.

Yet James Cook, explorer extraordinaire, made the dreams come true, turned fiction into reality in the story of his life, which is every bit as extraordinary as the story of his voyages.

Reaching the 71st degree south of latitude, in the grip of howling Antarctic gales, Cook wrote in his journal: “Ambition leads me not only farther than any other man has gone before me, but as far as I think it possible for man to go.”★

James Cook embraced the impossible.

Cook did not die in his native land; his body did not join the crowded family plot in the Marton churchyard. His end came in place and manner about as far from the sodden Yorkshire biggin as geography allows or the imagination can stretch. James Cook was speared and clubbed to death by natives of the Hawaiian islands.

Which he discovered.



Long before James Cook was born in the Yorkshire biggin another bold adventurer wrote, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20). The apostle Paul, explorer extraordinaire for the Lord Jesus Christ, embraced the impossible.

The original apostles, all of whom were Jews, focused their missionary efforts on fellow Jews or Gentiles who had been attracted to Judaism. But the risen Lord had commanded that the good news should go to the whole world (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8), and He chose the unlikeliest person to initiate the global mission. Putting His hand on Saul of Tarsus, strict Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, the Lord commissioned him: “Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:21).

From a human perspective, the task given Paul was impossible. How could the Roman Empire, proud of its might and civilization,