

C. Mervyn Maxwell: Memories of My Brother

Lawrence Maxwell

C. Mervyn Maxwell, 74, was born January 13, 1925, in Watford, England, not far from the Seventh-day Adventist Church's British publishing house, Stanborough Press, where our father was editor and general manager.¹ I arrived ten minutes later. For many years thereafter I was always a bit taller and a pound or two heavier, but I was always ten minutes younger. It has taken me 74 years to catch up on those ten minutes, and I would give anything if only I hadn't.

Growing up, he and I were always very close. We even invented some of our own words, as twins often do. We also corrupted the English language. To those who remember my brother as always editing other people's speech, it may be interesting to note our utter outrage when someone told us it was wrong to say "Give it to we." The two of us discussed the criticism seriously. Apparently some older person, maybe 10 or 12 years old, had told Mervyn we ought to say "Give it to us," but that couldn't possibly be right.

Let me pause here and share a problem. You folk here at the Seminary are used to calling Dr. Maxwell "Dr. Maxwell," and it probably sounds strange to you to hear me refer to him as Mervyn. But Dr. Maxwell gives me a problem. By Dr. Maxwell do you mean his big brother who teaches at Loma Linda? Or the Dr. Maxwell, his younger brother, currently president of PUC? Or perhaps Dr. Maxwell who taught nursing at Loma Linda? Or maybe Dr. Maxwell who received an honorary doctorate from Andrews University in 1970? And then again, sometimes kind folk introduce me as Dr. Maxwell. I'm always very grateful when they do, because they save me many years of fatiguing study. But I'll try to call Dr. Maxwell Dr. Maxwell and assume you will figure out which one I refer to.

Mother and Dad were determined to bring us up right, and because Sister White said not to put children in school too early, they did not enroll us in the

¹ These remarks are slightly edited from those given at my brother's funeral in Pioneer Memorial Church, Berrien Springs, MI, July 26, 1999

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local schools at the usual time. Soon five-year-old Dr. Maxwell and I were standing against the wall just inside the kitchen door listening to a man in uniform scolding our mother. We didn't think anyone had the right to talk to her like that—not to our Mother! We decided later he must have been the truant officer. This explains why it was already late in the fall term when we entered Park Gate Elementary. I did not want to be there and cried for several days. Apparently your Dr. Maxwell didn't want to be there either, but the nervous habit he developed and the symptom it produced I shall not here describe. Dr. Maxwell soon changed his mind and enjoyed school. He saw nothing to criticize about the barbarous custom of posting on the classroom bulletin board the names of all the students in the room with their scores in each of the final exams. He might have found fault with it, except that, in a class of twenty-six boys—there were no girls—his name was always among the top two or three.

It was in those days that he began to learn foreign languages, starting with Latin. For many months the Latin teacher required us, as soon as he entered the room, to begin repeating the verb endings in the present indicative active. So we would chant “o, s, t, mus, tis, nt, I, thou, he, we, you, they” over and over until he told us to stop. I know rote learning is supposed to be bad, but I still remember those endings, and I believe Mervyn did also, to the day of his death.

In those days too we had chickens in our back yard, 200 of them. You can read the sad fate of two of them at the hands of Dr. Maxwell and his twin brother in *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*. The three chicken houses had to be cleaned out every two or three weeks. What we cleaned out proved very good for growing vegetables. But Mervyn developed an allergy to it, so he was let off the unpleasant chore, and you can guess who took his place. But I will be honest. Our big brother Graham and Mother herself did most of the cleaning. May I insert here that when we came to America Mother said to Dad, “There'll be no more chickens!” There weren't.

Dr. Maxwell was eleven and a half when our father, attending the 1936 General Conference Session in San Francisco, was invited by Pacific Press to come to California and edit *Signs of the Times*. Among other reasons for accepting the call, Dad had been hoping for several years to get his children into Pacific Union College. This move opened the way.

But first Dr. Maxwell had to finish elementary school. Mother took us to the local church school a few days after we arrived at Mountain View in December, 1936. I clearly recall that the door was opened by an attractive 8th grader by the name of Anne Marie. I know it was Anne Marie. Mervyn insisted later it was a boy. Well, his memory sometimes faltered. Be that as it may, our new classmates forever afterward have reminded us of our short pants. I want to tell you about those short pants and the other clothes we were wearing. Those short pants were pure wool. We also had woolen suit coats, and blue cotton shirts and ties and caps. They were our school uniform in England; we had to wear them there. We were also required to wear wool socks that came almost to our knees.

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Those socks were marvelous; you could slide a ruler between the sock and your leg, and that left your hands empty for interesting things.

We now for the first time came up against Seventh-day Adventist education and American schools and multi-grade rooms all at once. One afternoon, soon after our arrival, Mr. Paul Meeth, 7th and 8th grade teacher, gave us a placement test. I think it was the history test he had given his students earlier that day. It was the first time we ran into True and False questions. And what questions they were! Let me give you two examples: “True or False: Prophecy is history before it happens?” “True or False: History is prophecy fulfilled?” I have never forgotten those questions; they seemed so strange. We waited at the school while Mr. Meeth marked our papers. We saw the scores of the other students. We saw that Mr. Meeth had given them A’s or B’s or C’s or D’s, and we expostulated indignantly to Mother when we got home that he had skipped right over E and given us both F’s. But Mr. Meeth must have seen something good, because he put us, just barely turning twelve, into the second semester of 7th grade. We enjoyed the American school better than the English—at least, I did, chiefly, I suspect, because we were not under so much pressure. And the students were more tolerant of our foibles than we were of theirs, though they did tease us about the English custom of dropping h’s at the beginning of words. We were amazed one day when everyone in both grades burst out laughing as Mervyn read aloud Genesis 1:11: “And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb . . .” [*sounds of scornful laughter*]. He looked around bewildered. Finally someone explained. “You’re not supposed to say herb,” he said, “you’re supposed to say ‘erb.” Now, I ask, who drop their h’s at the beginning of words?

From grade school to academy. Because our older brother and sister—Dr. Maxwell (Maureen) and Dr. Maxwell (Graham)—had gone on to PUC, and because little Dr. Maxwell (Malcolm) was still too young, many of the household chores fell on us twins. One was washing dishes. We got it down to a system. Every school night I would wash the dishes, clean the pots, and tidy up the kitchen. Mervyn would clear the supper table, take out the garbage, and dry the dishes.

Then came homework. We studied at the same table, and we always compared our answers. But we never copied them. Oh, you can be sure we didn’t copy them. It was much too humiliating to be wrong! If our answers differed there would always be a thorough restudy of our work, each of us desperately hoping to prove *our* answer was right.

During his academy years Mervyn developed a great interest in growing things. It was an interest that continued to develop all through his life, as evidenced by the intricate pattern of his back yard in Berrien Springs, and the lovely flowers he grew all winter in his glass house. During academy days our home had about fifty apricot trees. Mervyn took on himself the job of pruning them. He must have done a good job, because the fruit tasted better than any

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apricots one can buy in a store, and Mother canned many quarts. Mervyn also tried his hand at grafting, and I give him credit: several of his grafts grew successfully.

Mervyn was very active in extra-curricular activities at the academy. He edited the school paper one year, led the subscription campaign another—and got impatient to organize the senior class. In fact, he began to organize it before Harry Westermeyer, the school principal, was ready, which earned him a firm, but, withal, kind and gentle, rebuke! When the class finally organized, Mervyn got the idea that he could make the class pins. I should explain that behind our house was what Californians called a tank house, a building that supports a tank high enough to let the water flow down into the home. Beneath the tank, in our tank house, was a room that had once been home to the Japanese gardener whom the previous owner had been rich enough to hire full time. It had an old-fashioned, wood-burning stove with an oven inside and places on top for pots and pans. We cleaned the room, a very messy job—which I did most of—and protected a table with acid-proof paint. We ran a pipe under the driveway from the house so we would have natural gas for our Bunsen burner. Our parents must have had enormous confidence in us!

We conducted a number of experiments in our laboratory. We got some home-made cider from a neighbor and distilled the alcohol out of it, to the annoyance of the neighbor who didn't want people thinking there was alcohol in her apple juice. And we generated hydrogen gas. Dad promised us fifty cents if we could fill a balloon with hydrogen so it would float. We tried and failed and tried again. Finally with a series of rubber stoppers and glass tubes and rubber tubing we managed to catch hydrogen in a couple of glass gallon jars, then forced the gas into a balloon. The balloon floated! It was evening. Dad was out. We tied the floating balloon to the landing going upstairs so Dad would see it when he came in. We went to bed. In the morning, the balloon was no longer floating. It was held down with the weight of a dollar bill. Sure, Dad had promised us fifty cents, then gave us a dollar. That was typical of our Dad.

Well, to get back to those class pins. Mervyn's idea was to melt some metal in the old stove and pour it into molds and plate it. I was up in the tank house for just a few minutes one evening while he was working on the project. The sight of the roaring flames in that rusty stove scared me then and still scares me whenever I think of it. Only the good angels protected that dry old wooden building. Perhaps they knew that in the space above our room—where the water tank used to be—Dad was going to write *The Bible Story*. Anyway, to my great relief, Mervyn gave up on his project and lived to accomplish greater things.

College Days. After academy came college. But in between came our first full-time jobs. Mervyn worked all summer in the photo-engraving department of Pacific Press. I worked in the type room. Both departments are now as extinct as the dodo, victims of computers. All that summer I expected us to go to San Jose State College in the fall to take science, then on to PUC to take the minis-

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terial course, and then to Loma Linda for medicine, with the long-range plan of opening a medical office in a town where there were no Adventists and raising up a church. But near the end of that summer, Mervyn got a terrible burden to go into the ministry right away. I think there must have been something of the mystic about him; this burden was so very personal, and so very pressing. At the last minute, we applied at PUC—but by then the boys' dormitory was full. The college graciously opened a small, unused room in the basement of the administration building for us to move into. The arrangement was supposed to last about three weeks—till a couple of boys would leave the regular dormitory. As it turned out, we were there the whole year. Now don't get any ideas that this was an easy way to attend school. We still had to be at worship with the rest of the guys at 6:20 every morning!

It so happened that the windows in our room had a full view of the end of the girls' dormitory, Graf Hall. As you can see, this meant that the rooms in the end of Graf Hall had a clear view of the windows in our room. One evening I arrived at the room just in time to see Dr. Maxwell turning the room light on, then off, then on, then off—several times. I learned that he and a certain girl had developed a code. Perhaps that's enough on that one.

Dr. Maxwell loved putting on programs. He loved the fact that making arrangements required placing long-distance phone calls, which were much more complicated then than now. But he was frustrated by the lack of any way to dim or brighten the lights on stage. What with wartime shortages and the faculty's conservatism, there wasn't any hope of getting the professional equipment he longed for. So before one program he partially dismantled the switch board that controlled the platform lights, then provided himself with a basin partly full of salty water. During the program he carefully manipulated the ends of the wires in the briny mix, drawing them apart when he wanted dimming and bringing them closer when he wanted the lights brighter. Where the fire marshal was that evening I don't know.

Mervyn also loved editing. When asked to edit the 1945 school annual, *Diogenes Lantern*, he seized the opportunity and spent a great deal of time on it, often coming to bed after midnight. This cut into his study time. Meanwhile his brother—this brother—plodded along, underlining textbooks and writing notes in the margins. One night right before a major test (in physics, as I recall) he grabbed the textbook and buried himself in it, studying all my notations. Next day we both got A's, but his score was one point higher than mine.

Somewhere in here I must mention a young lady with golden hair who played the accordion. I don't know all the details, but one night she had to play and he got the job of raising and lowering the piano lid, both for her scheduled pieces and also for her encores. She had many encores. By the time the evening was over, they were both thoroughly annoyed with each other. Notice that. They were both annoyed. Their emotions had been stirred. Not favorably, to be sure, but they had been set in motion. And when the annoyance had passed, Dr. Mer-

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vyn felt a strange attraction to this pretty musician. His job now was to guide what he had begun. The young lady, as it happened, had a car—almost unheard of in those wartime years—and she also had a marimba. Though she could move the accordion unaided, she could not move the marimba without help. A time came when Mervyn volunteered to help with the heavy instrument, not only help to put it into her car but also help to take it out. After that, of course, it had to be set up, and he volunteered to do that, too. All this meant that he had to travel in the car with the marimba player, for there certainly was no other car he could travel in.

One summer evening in Yosemite, stretched out in her sleeping bag under the stars, the young lady noticed that Cassiopaea in the evening looks like the letter W—as in Weitz, Pauline Weitz, her name. She observed that by morning, the constellation had turned itself over and looked like the letter M—as in Maxwell, perhaps?

Pastor Maxwell. As in Maxwell, indeed. They graduated a year apart, Mervyn in 1946 and Pauline in 1947. Mervyn spent the year interning in Roseville, above Sacramento, in northern California. They were married in September, 1947. Their first church was East Stockton in Northern California. Then, Mervyn's internship completed, they were assigned to Mount Shasta, somewhat farther north. There, in full view of the magnificent, snow-clad volcano from which the town gets its name, they nurtured the church and did what many young ministers did in those post-war years, helped the congregation build a school. Then the conference sent them to Alturas, utterly remote, out beyond where the roads were fully surfaced.

Immediately they started a Pathfinder Club with two or three Adventist children and about the same number of non-Adventists. I visited them for their Investiture. I was to be the guest speaker, since no one else would come. Mervyn and Pauline had long before placed an order with the conference youth department for the necessary pins, tokens, and scarves, but none had arrived. Frantic long-distance calls had produced nothing. The last mail had been delivered—with no materials. Mervyn and Pauline got out red and blue pencils, cardboard, small safety pins, old bed sheets, packages of dye—and that afternoon we made Friend and Companion pins and honor tokens and kerchiefs. The Investiture began on time, and the children were just as excited to receive their cardboard pins and tokens and their dyed-sheet kerchiefs as if they had been the real thing! Perhaps even more so, knowing they were special.

The Rest of the Story. By now Mervyn was thinking he should go on for further education. He and Pauline moved to the Seminary, then in Takoma Park, Maryland, not realizing that he would spend nearly a third of his life chairing one of its departments.

In 1961, with his Seminary M.A., he was assigned to Colton in Southeastern California, then to Escondido. Always fascinated by technology, he built up

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an impressive collection of slides and projectors and related equipment to accompany his sermons.

From Escondido it was on to the University of Chicago for the Ph.D. But first, before he got the degree, he and Pauline got what they had wanted for a long time. On September 13, 1958, Stanley came to join them! With him and the Ph.D they went to Union College in 1966 to teach religion. In 1968 the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary urged Dr. Maxwell to come to them. From then on he was Professor of Church History and Chair of the Department of Church History at the Seminary for twenty years, till he retired in 1988.

Somewhere in all this he found time to author many published articles and several books including *Man, What a God!* and *Tell It to the World*, a history of the Adventist church. His two-volume commentary on Daniel and Revelation, *God Cares*, has been translated into several languages. Sales of his books number more than 700,000 copies. He conducted seminars on almost every continent. For several years he answered youth questions for *Signs of the Times*.

He died July 21, 1999, in a hospital near Berrien Springs, MI, after a long and vigorously fought battle with lymphoma.

For fifteen years before his death he was an active charter member of Adventist Heritage Ministry, an organization that purchases and restores buildings significant to early Adventist history. Projects have included the William Miller house in Maine, Hiram Edson's barn in upstate New York, and the Adventist Historic Village currently under construction in Battle Creek, Michigan, home of Adventist world headquarters from 1855 to 1903.

At the time of his death he was acting editor of *Adventist Affirm*, a popular magazine affirming the validity and contemporary relevance of historic Adventist beliefs and practices.

Dr. Maxwell was the son of the late Arthur S. ("Uncle Arthur") and Rachel E. Maxwell. He is survived by his wife, the former Pauline Weitz, their son Stanley and his wife Phemie, three brothers—A. Graham (and his wife Rosalyn), S. Lawrence, and D. Malcolm (and his wife Eileen)—a sister, Deirdre (Charles) Smith, and a little granddaughter, Roxanne. The funeral service was conducted in Pioneer Memorial Church on the Andrews University campus. Elder William Fagal of the Ellen G. White Estate officiated. In place of flowers, Dr. Maxwell requested gifts to Adventist Heritage Ministry. He was interred in Rose Hill cemetery in Berrien Springs.

*Lawrence Maxwell has spent most of his life writing and editing books and journals, including **Junior Guide** and **Signs of the Times**. smaxwell@juno.com*