

THE HISTORIANS AND THE MILLERITES: AN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY¹

GARY LAND
Andrews University

Although William Miller and his followers captured the attention of much of the United States in the 1840s with their prediction that Christ would come in 1843-44, it has taken considerable time for scholars to appreciate their historical significance. Appearing to many of their contemporaries as fanatics and dupes for fraudulent leaders, the Millerites seemed to stand outside mainstream American culture. This image of Millerism as an American oddity shaped virtually all subsequent writing on the movement.

Millerite historiography has passed basically through three periods. The first of these, which consisted largely of memoirs by the movement's participants, who sought to defend their beliefs and actions, began in the mid-nineteenth century and extended to the early twentieth. Then, during the first half of the new century, major secondary works appeared, based on research but framed primarily as a debate between detractors and apologists for the movement. While a few historians had given the Millerites attention previously, after 1950 an academic interest in the movement grew slowly, reaching a high point in the 1980s. This academic phase built upon the previous writing, but rather than attacking or defending the Millerites it analyzed their relationship to American society. By the mid-1990s scholars were no longer viewing Miller and his followers as fanatics. Instead, they were more precisely defining the similarities and differences between the Millerites and the nineteenth-century American culture of which they were a part.

¹This article appears as an introduction to Everett N. Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crises 1831-1844*, with a Foreword and Historiographical Essay by Gary Land (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, Oct. 1994, xxviii + 221 pp.). Land's essay treats all major published and unpublished works on the Millerite Movement. Dick's work is reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *AUSS*, as is another recent publication on the Millerites, G. R. Knight's *Millennial Fever and the End of the World*.

The participants' memoirs have provided the foundation for virtually all the historical literature on the Millerites. It seems fitting that the first of these memoirs to appear focused on William Miller himself. In the course of his preaching, Miller had faced the charge of fanaticism. His followers, desiring to correct what they believed to be a distorted public image, produced in 1853 a volume titled *Memoirs of William Miller*. Apollos Hale, a Millerite preacher, wrote the first three chapters and an associate, Sylvester Bliss, who completed the bulk of the work, appears as the author.

The publisher of the *Memoirs*, Joshua V. Himes, wrote the introduction, leaving no doubt as to the book's purpose. He wanted the impartial reader "to be able to form a just estimate of one who has occupied so conspicuous a position before the public. . . ." Further,

As the public learns to discriminate between the actual position of Mr. Miller and that which prejudice has conceived that he occupied, his conservativeness and disapprobation of every fanatical practice will be admitted, and a more just estimate will be had of him.²

The authors drew upon interviews and their own memories, but for the most part they let Miller speak for himself through large extracts from his correspondence, sermons and other papers. And throughout the work, they built a positive image, presenting Miller as a man of piety, patriotism, and considerable mental ability. Bliss argued that Miller's preaching brought genuine revivals and that his theology held much in common with the beliefs of his critics. Miller also appeared as a strong opponent of fanaticism, combatting such developments as the Starkweather sanctification teachings prior to 1844 and the "Shut Door" theory after the "Great Disappointment." In all of these points, Hale and Bliss established the main lines of argument to be followed by later Adventist apologists. Their volume also preserved much primary source material upon which later historians would rely. Their book maintained some popularity, providing nearly all of James White's life of Miller,³ and appearing in an abridged edition with some added material in 1895.⁴

Where Hale and Bliss concentrated on Miller, Isaac C. Wellcome, an Advent Christian preacher, surveyed the entire movement, as well

²Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller Generally Known as a Lecturer on the Prophecies, and the Second Coming of Christ* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), iv.

³James White, *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller, Gathered From His Memoir by the Late Sylvester Bliss and From Other Sources by James White* (Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1875).

⁴*A Brief History of William Miller the Great Pioneer in Adventual Faith* (Boston: Advent Christian Publishing society, 1895).

as early Advent Christian history, in his *History of the Second Advent Message*, published in 1874.⁵ The apologetic motive again appeared. "Every religious, political, or moral movement . . .," wrote Wellcome, "is worthy of being set fairly before the inquiring multitudes in truthful history, that the uninformed may learn the merits or demerits of the principles which produce such revolution."⁶ As he explained his purpose further, Wellcome stated that he intended to show the positive religious effects of Adventism, the theological and practical problems of those who opposed the movement, and the reproach brought on the cause by various bigots and fanatics.⁷ "It must be acknowledged that this message is a '*Dispensational Truth*,'" he concluded, "which the Lord intended should be published at this time, and which he has accompanied with his special blessing that it may prepare a people for his coming and kingdom."⁸

To accomplish his purpose, Wellcome followed essentially the same method as Hale and Bliss. In addition to relying upon memories, both his own and those of others, he presented many quotations and long extracts from contemporary materials, largely newspapers and tracts. Like Bliss, he drew attention to the religious revivals that followed in the wake of Miller's preaching. In dealing with Miller's critics, Wellcome showed how they either misrepresented Miller or revealed a growing skepticism regarding the doctrine of the Second Advent.⁹ Of the various individuals and movements that he regarded as fanatical, Wellcome spent the most time on Ellen and James White and the emergence of Seventh-day Adventists. He regarded Ellen's visions "as the product of the over-excited imagination of her mind, and not as fact," believing that they simply reflected the preaching of Joseph Turner and others on the "Shut Door."¹⁰ He further distinguished Seventh-day Adventism from the Advent movement and described it as "a system of dictatorial ecclesiastical government."¹¹

These apologetic elements, however, played a relatively minor part in Wellcome's history. Its major contribution was twofold. By bringing together a vast amount of information and primary sources, Wellcome

⁵Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, Maine: I. C. Wellcome, 1874).

⁶Ibid., 9.

⁷Ibid., 10-11.

⁸Ibid., 198-210.

⁹Ibid., 402.

¹⁰Ibid., 406.

¹¹Ibid.

produced a balanced and substantive description of the Millerite movement and the Advent Christian Church that arose from it. The volume is still generally regarded as one of the best accounts of the Millerites available. But beyond this, Wellcome gave Adventists an historical identity. He placed the Millerite movement not only within the context of increasing premillennial interest in America, but also regarded it as part of a world-wide phenomenon by pointing to the ministries of Joseph Wolff, Charlotte Elizabeth, Edward Irving, and Manuel Lacunza.¹² This identity would achieve increasing importance in the Adventist mind, as when Albert C. Johnson's history of the Advent Christian Church described the Millerite movement as both part of an international movement and "a very notable revival of the Ancient Hope."¹³

Despite Wellcome's criticism of Seventh-day Adventists, they saw themselves as true spiritual descendants of William Miller and therefore maintained an interest in Millerite history. Their first venture into historical writing took the form of autobiography. Ellen White's *My Christian Experience, Views and Labors*, which James White published in 1860, was the first Adventist autobiography to appear in book form. Later extensively revised and published under the title *Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White*, this volume devoted its early chapters to the Millerite movement as experienced by a teen-age Ellen White in Portland, Maine.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the autobiography of another Seventh-day Adventist had appeared. Asked to tell his story for the inspiration of young people, Joseph Bates began publishing a series of articles about his life in the *Youth's Instructor* in 1858. Several years later, James White compiled these pieces into *The Early Life and Later Experiences and Labors of Elder Joseph Bates*.¹⁵ Approximately two-thirds of this volume described Bates's pre-Adventist years, emphasizing that because of his experience with seamen he became a Christian and moral reformer. The

¹²Ibid., 146-160, 524-564.

¹³Albert C. Johnson, *Advent Christian History* (Boston: Advent Christian Publication Society, 1918), 11-117.

¹⁴Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2: *My Christian Experience, Views and Labors in Connection With the Rise and Progress of the Third Angel's Message* (Battle Creek: James White, 1860), 12-30; Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches, Ancestry, Early Life, Christian Experiences, and Extensive Labors of Elder James White and His Wife, Mrs. Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1886), 26-63.

¹⁵James White, ed., *The Early Life and Later Experiences and Labors of Elder Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1878).

remainder of the story discussed Bates's role in the Millerite movement and his adoption of the Sanctuary and Sabbath doctrines after the "Great Disappointment." Unlike the other Adventist historical writings to date, this book carried no apologetic argument.

When Seventh-day Adventists began writing general histories of their church, they followed themes established by earlier writers. John N. Loughborough organized his books around the theme of "Tokens of God's hand in the Movement." The first of these "tokens" was the fact that the Advent proclamation arose in many places at about the same time.¹⁶ In the 1920s, M. Ellsworth Olsen placed Adventism within the context of reform, an effort begun by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. The recovery of the doctrine of the Advent in the nineteenth century, which Olsen examined in considerable detail, was one more step in the work of sloughing off the inroads of paganism.¹⁷ In contrast to Wellcome, both Loughborough and Olsen regarded Seventh-day Adventists as the true spiritual progeny of the Millerites.

A new era in Millerite history began in 1924 with the publication of Clara Endicott Sears's *Days of Delusion: A Strange Bit of History*. This volume, based on contemporary documents and the first- and second-hand memories of people whom the author contacted, described Millerism as a "strange religious agitation [that] swept thousands away from the path of right reasoning."¹⁸ Much of the book concentrated on various exhibitions of fanaticism, such as the giving away of property, the wearing of ascension robes, and meeting on October 22, 1844 in graveyards. Sears concluded that much of the fanaticism had resulted from poorly educated people preaching the Millerite message.¹⁹ This popularly written history seemed to confirm the legends of Millerism and her description became standard fare for American history

¹⁶J. N. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists with Tokens of God's Hand in the Movement and a Brief Sketch of the Advent Cause from 1831-1844* (Battle Creek: General Conference Association of the Seventh-day Adventists, 1892), 29-60; J. N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement: Its Rise and Progress* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1905), 108-170.

¹⁷M. Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1925), 107-165.

¹⁸Clara Endicott Sears, *Days of Delusion: A Strange Bit of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), xxv.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 67-78, 160-236. See also Grover C. Loud, *Evangelized America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1928), 162-180, which also retells the alleged Millerite excesses but does not cite Sears in its bibliography.

textbooks and other books.²⁰ That the Millerite mythology is still growing is evident when a 1994 publication states, "some purchased their robes on credit, rationalizing that Judgment Day would cancel the debt,"²¹ a particularly interesting statement because in most of the traditional stories it was Himes who was selling the ascension robes.

Obviously, Adventists did not like the idea that their denominations were rooted in a fanatical movement. In the centennial year of the "Great Disappointment," Francis D. Nichol, editor of the official Seventh-day Adventist church paper, *Review and Herald*, challenged this interpretation on all points. Although his bibliography indicated extensive research in primary sources, Nichol consciously avoided writing a history of the Millerite movement because of his "spiritual kinship with the Millerites," the difficulty of writing impartial history, and because the times called for an apologetic work.²² Nichol also believed that the spiritual children of a religious leader "can understand his motives, sympathize with his hopes, and follow his reasoning in theological areas in a way that a stranger never can."²³ Hence, Nichol

²⁰ See Francis D. Nichol, "The Growth of the Millerite Legend," *Church History*, 21 (September, 1952), 296-313. A sampling of textbooks that retell these stories includes Dumas Malone & Basil Rauch, *Empire for Liberty: The Genesis and Growth of the United States of America*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960), 513; Harry J. Carman, et al., *A History of the American People*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 506-507; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 517; Samuel Eliot Morison, et al., *The Growth of the American Republic*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 488; Rebecca Brooks Gruver, *An American History*, 2nd. ed. (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1972), 393; Henry F. Bedford & Trevor Colbourn, *The Americans: A Brief History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), 173; Joseph R. Conlin, *The American Past: A Survey of American History*, 4th ed. (New York: The Harcourt Press, 1994), 268; Gary B. Nash, et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994), 409. Carl Carmer's collection of upstate New York folklore, *Listen for a Lonesome Drum* (New York: David McKay Co., 1936), 167-171, is an example of a popular work influenced by Sears. For examinations of fictional treatments of the Millerites see James Ehrlich, "Ascension Robes and Other Millerite Fables," *Adventist Heritage* 2 (Summer 1975): 8-13 and Gary Scharnhorst, "Images of the Millerites in American Literature," *American Quarterly* 32 (Spring 1980): 19-36.

²¹W. J. Rorabaugh and Donald T. Critchlow, *America! A Concise History* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994), 166-167.

²²Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of the Character and Conduct of William Miller and the Millerites, Who Mistakenly Believed that the Second Coming of Christ Would Take Place in the Year 1844* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1944), 10-13.

²³*Ibid.*, 16.

cast himself in the role of a defense lawyer presenting his case before the judgment bar.

The first two-thirds of *The Midnight Cry* contained a narrative of William Miller and Millerism that, while noting the various charges lodged against the subject, did not pursue them in detail. The latter portion, however, took up the charges one by one. The assertion that Millerism resulted in cases of insanity and fanatical practices such as the wearing of ascension robes, Nichol found based on hearsay and rumor, arguing that contemporary records gave no support to the charges. While admitting that some fanaticism existed within the movement, he pleaded that Millerism's religious expression was little different from other revival movements of the day and that Millerite leaders had consistently opposed fanaticism. On the issue of theology, he concluded that Millerism was part of an increasing interest in Biblical prophecy that had developed for a century or more and differed mainly in its interpretation of the sanctuary cleansing spoken of in Daniel 8:13-14.²⁴ Nichol concluded,

With the fogs of rumor and religious prejudice thus removed, Millerism stands out, not as a flawless movement, either on doctrine or deportment—there never has been such—but as a movement that does not suffer by comparison with other religious awakenings that have taken place through the centuries.²⁵

The Midnight Cry obtained the results that Nichol and his denomination wanted. Although most reviewers criticized the strong apologetic tone, wishing Nichol had written a history instead, they found his arguments convincing.²⁶ And most importantly, Whitney Cross's *The Burned-Over District*, a major work on religious revival in western New York published in 1950, accepted Nichol's conclusions and gradually influenced historical writing.²⁷ A recent student of

²⁴Ibid., 493-496.

²⁵Ibid., 496.

²⁶See reviews in *The Christian Century* 62 (7 March 1945): 304; *The American Historical Review* 51 (January 1946): 331-32; and *Church History* 14 (September 1945): 223-226.

²⁷Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: the Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), 287-321. See also D. S. Porter, "The Influence of F. D. Nichol's *The Midnight Cry* (1944) on recent historians' treatment of Millerism" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Heritage Room, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI. Nichol's impact is most clearly illustrated by the differences between William Warren Sweet's *The Story of Religion in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), 401-403 and his *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), 307-311. Whereas the earlier volume retells the traditional Millerite stories, the

Millerism, however, has concluded not only that Nichol sometimes intentionally misinterpreted evidence but, more importantly, that his arguments are ultimately unprovable.²⁸

Whereas Nichol was primarily concerned with challenging the historical image of the Millerites, another Seventh-day Adventist writer, LeRoy Edwin Froom, sought to rescue his denomination from its status as a non-Christian cult in the eyes of many fundamentalists and evangelicals. He demonstrated that the historicist approach to prophetic interpretation developed by Miller and continued by Seventh-day Adventists had deep roots within Christian history rather than being a deviant system of recent origin, as critics frequently charged.

In four massive volumes titled *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, Froom argued that "The Great Second Advent Movement cannot be explained on any merely social, psychological, economic or organizational grounds. It partook of the nature and spirit of a great Christian crusade, with its rootage deep in the long past."²⁹ Only about half of the fourth volume addressed Millerism and modern Adventism, expressing Froom's belief that they had completed "the Contribution of the Centuries by Retention, Restoration, and Advance."³⁰ Strongly apologetic, Froom's series was widely praised for its exhaustive research but, in the words of Ernest R. Sandeen, it is "astonishingly accurate in its references to particular men and events, but virtually without historical merit when Froom lifts his eyes above the level of the catalog of the British museum."³¹

author states in his later work that "[Nichol] has convincingly shown that many of the stories of the excesses committed by the Millerites had little basis in fact," 307. The psychological discussion of Millerism in terms of "cognitive dissonance" that appeared in Leon Festinger, et al., *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 12-23, appears to have relied entirely on Nichol.

²⁸David Leslie Rowe, "Thunder and Trumpets: The Millerite Movement and Apocalyptic Thought in Upstate New York, 1800-1845." (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1974), 54, 205-206.

²⁹LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954), 10.

³⁰ Ibid, vol. 4, 853. Pages 429 to 851 discuss the Millerite movement. See also LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Movement of Destiny* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1971), 25-71. Arthur W. Spalding largely depended upon Froom for his brief account of the Millerites in *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1961), 11-23.

³¹Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 288.

A few Seventh-day Adventist writers continued this apologetic approach to Millerism. Jerome Clark, a college history professor, attempted in 1844 to place the Millerite movement within the context of contemporary American social and cultural developments. Basing his work almost entirely on secondary sources and providing no general interpretive framework, Clark offered primarily a series of descriptive chapters on such topics as Millerism, antislavery, and the temperance movement. What little interpretation he did venture was theological, as when he asserted that the Millerite movement was "ordained of God"³² and that evolution arose in the mid-nineteenth century "because Satan feared the Advent Movement and did not want its truths to be taught."³³

Within a similar apologetic framework, Robert Gale's *The Urgent Voice* presented a popular account of Millerism for a Seventh-day Adventist audience. Gale stated that "God was guiding the movement all along" and concluded that "the movement was really not of Miller, it was of God," who used it to bring forth Seventh-day Adventism.³⁴ Apart from a few such statements, however, *The Urgent Voice* offered largely a narrative of the Millerite movement based upon secondary sources.

C. Mervyn Maxwell, a professor of church history at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, responded to an emerging controversy within Seventh-day Adventism in the 1970s over righteousness by faith and the doctrines of the investigative judgment and Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. He therefore took a more explicitly theological approach in his general history of Seventh-day Adventism, *Tell It To The World*, published in 1976. Arguing that there were a number of Biblical texts that could have prevented Miller from misunderstanding the phrase "cleansing of the sanctuary" and applying it to Christ's Second Coming, Maxwell stated that God had allowed Miller to preach because the world needed to know that "Jesus was about to enter upon a great process of atonement."³⁵

Although the apologetic approach to Millerism dominated writing about the subject, scholars slowly developed an interest in it. In 1920 John Bach McMaster recounted the Millerite story in his multivolume

³²Jerome Clark, *1844*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1968), 60.

³³*Ibid.*, vol. 3, 173.

³⁴Robert Gale, *The Urgent Voice: The Story of William Miller* (Washington, D.C.: The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1975), 124, 154, 132.

³⁵C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It To the World: The Story of Seventh-day Adventists* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1976), 44-45.

A History of the People of the United States, but he uncritically cited newspaper accounts of suicides, ascension robes, and insanity.³⁶ Reuben Harkness, whose 1927 doctoral dissertation appears to have been the first extensive academic study of the Millerites, argued that they constituted the “poor and oppressed” responding to the panic of 1837. Unfortunately, Harkness was primarily interested in applying a theory of millenarianism to the Millerites rather than extensively reading the original sources.³⁷

About the time that Harkness completed his dissertation, Everett Dick, a Seventh-day Adventist Ph.D candidate in history at the University of Wisconsin, began writing a dissertation on the Millerite movement, extensively researching Millerism’s primary sources, particularly its papers. Describing the development of its organizational and publishing activities, he demonstrated that the Millerite movement borrowed many of its techniques from the reform and revival movements of the first half of the nineteenth century. He also examined the social nature of Millerism, arguing that it coincided with the high point of the revival sweeping America during the first half of the nineteenth century and pointing out that it was a democratic movement, made up largely of lay people.³⁸

After Dick completed his dissertation in 1930, academic interest in Millerism developed sporadically, although from the beginning it sought to understand the movement within the context of nineteenth-century American culture. Although David Ludlum’s study of *Social Ferment in Vermont* used Sears’s account for stories of ascension robes, he regarded Millerism as rooted in the Second Great Awakening and suggested that

³⁶John Bach McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States, From the Revolution to the Civil War*, vol. 7 (D. Appleton and Company, 1920), 134-141.

³⁷Reuben E. Harkness, “Social Origins of the Millerite Movement,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1927). I have discussed briefly the Harkness and Dick dissertations because they were the first scholarly studies of Millerism, although neither had much influence on subsequent research. Similarly, more recent dissertations that remained unpublished either as articles or books have played little role in the published discussion of Millerism. I have, therefore, cited these later studies in the endnotes but not examined them in the text.

³⁸Everett N. Dick, “The Advent Crisis of 1843-1844,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1930). See also Everett N. Dick, “The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845” in *Adventism in America: A History*, ed. Gary Land (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 1-35, which summarizes and updates the 1930 study.

it "represented the summation of all the reforms of the age," namely overnight perfection.³⁹

In 1943 the *New England Quarterly* published an essay by Ira V. Brown on "The Millerites and the Boston Press." Anticipating Nichol's argument, Brown argued that in purveying such stories as the ascension robes and charging the Millerites with financial fraud, the newspapers of the day had low reporting and editorial standards. All involved—newspapers, reading public, and the Millerites themselves, Brown concluded, were credulous.⁴⁰ The following year, Alice Felt Tyler's *Freedom's Ferment* appeared, which saw the religious and social reform movements between the Revolution and the Civil War as expressions of the desire to perfect human institutions. Her treatment of Millerism, which appeared in a chapter titled "Millennialism and Spiritualism," drew primarily from the works of Bliss and Sears, repeating the stories of ascension robes and suicides on October 22, 1844, calling Miller a "prophet," and describing the whole enterprise as a "delusion."⁴¹ Despite these characterizations, Tyler's effort to place Millerism within the cultural context of nineteenth-century America anticipated the direction of future scholarship.

Six years later, as noted above, Whitney R. Cross published a work similar to Tyler's in its coverage of the social and religious movements of the first half of the nineteenth century but restricted to the geographical area of western New York state. Regarding the "Burned-Over District" as an economy reaching agricultural maturity, Cross placed the phenomena of this period within an economic context.⁴²

Cross's treatment of Millerism moved beyond Tyler's in two major respects. Firstly, influenced by Nichol's apologetic, he saw little basis for the ascension-robe stories or charges of increased insanity.⁴³

³⁹David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850*, Columbia Studies in American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 250-260. Possibly the first academic study of the Millerites to appear in print was Simon Stone, "The Miller Delusion: A Comparative Study of Mass Psychology," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 91 (1934), 593-623.

⁴⁰Ira V. Brown, "The Millerites and the Boston Press," *New England Quarterly* 16 (1943):592-614. For a later study of the press response to the Millerites see Madeline Warner, "The Changing Image of the Millerites in the Western Massachusetts Press," *Adventist Heritage* 2 (Summer 1975):5-7.

⁴¹Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944), 70-78.

⁴²Cross, 75-76.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 306.

Secondly, he delved into the primary sources, which led him to emphasize the similarity of the Millerites with their surrounding culture. "Adventism became an integral portion of Burned-over District history," he argued, "thoroughly interrelated with the other rural manifestations of religious enthusiasm."⁴⁴ The Millerites, Cross concluded, simply developed more consistently and literally the basic assumptions of conservative protestant orthodoxy.⁴⁵ Cross thereby moved a fundamental implication of Nichol's argument to the status of a well-argued historical interpretation, and established the framework within which future scholarship would take place. About the same time, Ira Brown made a similar argument, suggesting that rather than being an aberration, the Millerite belief was simply an extreme example of a "wholly orthodox" millenarian tradition.⁴⁶

Twenty years would pass before another scholar would publish a significant account of Millerism. Whereas previously historians had written relatively little about the role of religion in American history, the 1970s witnessed the start of an outpouring of research on the subject. Among the reasons for the change was the emergence of social history, which frequently revealed the religious dimension of American society, and the entry into the profession of a number of scholars of evangelical background, who had an almost "natural" interest in the historical role of conservative protestantism. As one aspect of this interest in American religion, millennialism attracted the attention of several scholars.⁴⁷

Ernest R. Sandeen, a graduate of evangelical Wheaton College, searched for *The Roots of Fundamentalism* in nineteenth-century millennialism. Although he devoted most of his book to dispensationalist premillennialism, Sandeen examined Millerism within the millennial context that preceded dispensationalism. Strongly influenced by Nichol, Sandeen emphasized the similarities between Millerism and other millennial groups, including British millennialism. Indeed, he found only two major differences from the British version—Miller's

⁴⁴Ibid., 288.

⁴⁵Ibid., 320.

⁴⁶ Ira V. Brown, "Watchers for the Second Coming: The Millenarian Tradition in America," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39 (December 1952): 441-458. See also Harold A. Larrabee, "The Trumpeter of Doomsday," *American Heritage* 15 (April 1964): 35-37, 95-100.

⁴⁷Jonathan M. Butler and Ronald L. Numbers discuss the relationship of the literature on millennialism to an understanding of the Millerites in "Introduction," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), xv-xxiv.

unwillingness to accept that the Jews would return to Palestine and his conviction that only believers would survive the Second Advent. Indeed, he observed, "the expectation that the year 1843 would bring the next great cataclysm was quite common among historicist premillenarians in both Britain and the United States."⁴⁸

Sandeen argued that Millerism's debacle prejudiced Americans against millenarianism in general and the historicist interpretation in particular, the latter attitude preparing the way for dispensationalism with its futurist approach to the prophecies.⁴⁹ He also put forward an interpretive problem, stating that an understanding must be developed that accounts for the emergence of millenarianism at about the same time in both Britain and America. Explanations limited to each country's individual experience were inadequate, he concluded.⁵⁰

Shortly after the publication of Sandeen's book, Vern Carner and Ronald L. Numbers of Loma Linda University, a Seventh-day Adventist institution in southern California, organized a series of lectures, published in 1974 as *The Rise of Adventism*.⁵¹ Bringing together essays by leading scholars on aspects of nineteenth-century society that were closely tied to the Millerite movement, the volume led a reinvigoration of historical interest in the Millerite movement and the subsequent history of Adventism.

Most of the essays did not address Millerism directly, although some writers such as Sandeen, who argued that Millerism represented a general American revival,⁵² briefly touched on the subject. In the only essay dealing entirely with Millerism, David T. Arthur, of the Advent Christian Aurora College in Illinois, who had written an M.A. thesis and a doctoral dissertation on the Millerite movement, focused on the developing process of sectarianism.⁵³ The Millerite conviction of having

⁴⁸Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 52.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 54-55, 59-60.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 57-58. For an examination of the British Millerites see Louis Billington, "The Millerite Adventists in Great Britain, 1840-1850," *The Journal of American Studies* 1 (October 1967): 191-212; and Hugh I. B. Dunton, "The Millerite Adventists and Other Millenarian Groups in Great Britain, 1830-1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1984).

⁵¹Edwin Scott Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974).

⁵²Ernest R. Sandeen, "Millennialism," in *ibid.*, 110.

⁵³David Talmage Arthur, "Joshua V. Himes and the Cause of Adventism, 1839-1845" (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1961); David Talmage Arthur, "Come Out of Babylon: A Study of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism" (Ph.D. diss.,

the truth, the development of its own papers and an organization for raising money and evangelizing, and Himes's largely centralized leadership of the movement unintentionally created an alternative to the established churches, Arthur said. The call in 1843 to "come out of Babylon," he concluded, simply brought to completion the internal logic of the movement.⁵⁴ In addition to these essays, *The Rise of Adventism* contributed significantly to later scholarship with its publication of an extensive bibliography of Millerite and other Adventist sources.⁵⁵

The effort to look at the Millerites within a larger cultural context appeared in several other works of the 1970s. Richard Carwardine regarded Millerism as a reaction to the social and economic distresses experienced by Americans after 1837 and found the peak of the Second Great Awakening coming in the Adventist phase of 1843-44.⁵⁶ Also seeing Millerism as part of a millenarian subculture, J. F. C. Harrison said that it "elaborated . . . certain aspects to a high degree" and "appeared as a form of religious or theological self-help, which encouraged a do-it-yourself interpretation of scripture."⁵⁷

In contrast to these studies which looked at Millerism as a social movement, three Seventh-day Adventist European scholars emphasized Millerite theology. A Swedish church historian, Ingemar Lindén, argued in *The Last Trump* that Miller's teachings reflected several aspects of American culture, particularly the tension between an emotional

University of Rochester, 1970). Richard Schwarz's denominationally sponsored Seventh-day Adventist history textbook, *Lightbearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979), 24-71, depended heavily upon Arthur's work, as well as that of Dick and Froom. See also Raymond J. Bean, "The Influence of William Miller in the History of American Christianity" (Th.D. diss., Boston University, 1949); David Arnold Dean, "Echoes of the Midnight Cry: The Millerite Heritage in the Apologetics of the Advent Christian Denomination, 1860-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1976).

⁵⁴David T. Arthur, "Millerism," in *Rise of Adventism*, Gausted, ed., 154-172. Arthur also published "After the Great Disappointment: To Albany and Beyond," *Adventist Heritage* 1 (January 1974): 5-10, 78.

⁵⁵Vern Carner, Sakae Kubo, and Curt Rice, "Bibliographical Essay," in Gaustad, 207-319. Carner also later edited for Xerox University Microfilms a selection of these sources titled "William Miller, the Millerites, and Early Adventists" (1977).

⁵⁶Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 52.

⁵⁷J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 192-203.

biblicism and a deistic rationalism. Lindén concluded that Millerism was “a variant form of American protestantism and not a ‘bizarre cult.’”⁵⁸

P. Gerard Damsteegt, a Dutch scholar, described the internal theological development of Millerism, noting that Miller’s interpretive “principles were a part of the Protestant hermeneutical tradition which can be traced back to the primitive church.”⁵⁹ Damsteegt also described Millerism as an “interconfessional movement” until hostility to it made separatism “inevitable.”⁶⁰

Pursuing further this interest in Millerite theology, a Finnish academic, Kai Arasola, more than ten years later regarded Millerism as the “logical outcome” of the historicist method of prophetic interpretation that had dominated protestantism for three hundred years.⁶¹ Miller, however, “exhausted” this approach while the seventh-month movement, which promoted October 22, 1844 as the day of Christ’s coming, “marked the end of historicism and made futurism or preterism attractive.”⁶²

Although these European theological studies were largely outside the mainstream of Millerite scholarship, they generally supported the socially-oriented studies that saw the Millerites as an expression of American evangelical culture. This relationship between Millerism and America increasingly provided the focus for Millerite historiography.

The 1980s saw this emerging interest in Millerism come to fruition, as a number of scholars, both within and without Adventism, began to study the movement. Whereas previous scholarly books had only included the Millerites as one element within a larger subject, the new decade witnessed book-length treatments of Millerism. An Advent Christian historian, Clyde E. Hewitt, published in 1983 *Midnight and Morning*, the first volume in a multivolume history of his denomination. Although popularly written and not based on original research, *Midnight and Morning* presented a thoughtful and quite objective

⁵⁸Ingemar Lindén, *The Last Trump: An Historico-Genetical Study of Some Important Chapters in the Making and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1978), 40, 64.

⁵⁹P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 17.

⁶⁰Ibid., 46.

⁶¹Kai Arasola, *The End of Historicism: Millerite Hermeneutic of Time Prophecies in the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Uppsala: privately printed, 1990), 146.

⁶²Ibid., 19.

account of the Millerite movement.⁶³ Rather than contrasting alleged Millerite pessimism with the optimism of nineteenth-century reformers, Hewitt suggested—as had Ludlum more than forty years previously—that Millerism appealed to the spirit of the reformers because it offered the ultimate reform, the second coming of Christ. He also noted that Millerism was very much a part of its times; at least fifty other Biblical expositors on both sides of the Atlantic were looking for the Second Advent to occur between 1843 and 1847.⁶⁴ Although Hewitt primarily synthesized previous scholarship on Millerism, he gave the first balanced published account of the emergence of the various Adventist denominations in the wake of the “Disappointment.”⁶⁵

A conference held in Killington, Vermont, May 31 to June 3, 1984, organized by Wayne R. Judd and Ronald L. Numbers, brought together for the first time “both Adventist and non-Adventist scholars interested in critically evaluating the Millerite experience and its place in American history.”⁶⁶ Although the conference papers addressed a number of issues, many of them suggested that the Millerites shared much with their culture, including demographics, millenarianism, commitment to reform, biblicism, and pietism. As David L. Rowe stated, “Millerites are not fascinating because they were so different from everyone else but because they were so like their neighbors.”⁶⁷

Such statements presented a problem, however. If they were so similar to their culture, why did the Millerites stir so much controversy? A possible answer lay in Ruth Alden Doan’s suggestion that Millerite images of imminent supernatural intervention into the world conflicted with a growing evangelical belief in gradual change brought about by transformation of the hearts of believers.⁶⁸ Most of the conference’s participants, though, reinforced the interpretation that the Millerites held much in common with their culture. Ronald and Janet Numbers, for instance, argued that not only were the Millerites “no more prone to mental illness than their neighbors” but they also “adopted the

⁶³Clyde E. Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning: An Account of the Adventist Awakening and the Founding of the Advent Christian Denomination, 1831-1860* (Charlotte, N.C.: Venture Books, 1983).

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 46, 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 180-284.

⁶⁶Butler and Numbers, “Introduction,” in Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*, xvii.

⁶⁷David L. Rowe, “Millerites: A Shadow Portrait,” in Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*, 15.

⁶⁸Ruth Alden Doan, “Millerism and Evangelical Culture,” in Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*, 129-130.

prevailing view that undue religious excitement might be harmful to a person's mental health."⁶⁹ Such interpretations extended to the radical wing of postdisappointment Millerism. As Seventh-day Adventism emerged out of "the disappointed," Jonathan M. Butler—drawing concepts from the work of historian John Higham—found it reflecting larger cultural patterns, namely a move from "boundlessness to consolidation."⁷⁰

During the next few years, several books appeared more fully exploring the Americanness of the Millerites. David L. Rowe's *Thunder and Trumpets*, based on his 1974 dissertation, saw pre-1843 Millerism reflecting American culture in its revivalism, millennialism, and pietism. After 1843, however, Millerism began developing its own personality, particularly by emphasizing time-setting, but even this reflected a long tradition of historicist exegesis.⁷¹ Rowe also noted the variety within Millerism involving such issues as the time of Christ's coming, the conversion of the Jews, the role of women, and annihilationism.⁷² Similar to Butler, he observed that the movement "was an antiformalist rebellion against the formalization of the evangelical pietistic denominations." But in the wake of the "Disappointment," Rowe

⁶⁹Ronald L. Numbers and Janet S. Numbers, "Millerism and Madness: A Study of 'Religious Insanity' in Nineteenth-Century America" in Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*, 105, 110.

⁷⁰Jonathan M. Butler, "The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism," in Numbers and Butler, eds., *The Disappointed*, 190. See also "From Millerism to Seventh-day Adventism: 'Boundlessness to Consolidation,'" *Church History*, 55 (1986): 50-64.

⁷¹David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, no. 38 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 48-49, 67-68. Rowe also published "Elon Galusha and the Millerite Movement," *Foundations: A Baptist Journal of History and Theology* 8 (July-Sept. 1975): 252-260; "Comets and Eclipses: The Millerites, Nature, and the Apocalypse," *Adventist Heritage*, 3 (Winter 1976): 10-19; and "A New Perspective on the Burned-Over District: The Millerites in Upstate New York," *Church History* 47 (December 1978): 408-420. For other regional studies of Millerism, see N. Gordon Thomas, "The Millerite Movement in the State of Ohio" (M.A. thesis, Ohio University, 1957); N. Gordon Thomas, "The Second Coming in the Third New England: The Millerite Impulse in Michigan, 1830-60" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1967), 109-142; N. Gordon Thomas, "The Millerite Movement in Ohio," *Ohio History* 81 (1972): 95-101; N. Gordon Thomas, *The Millennial Impulse in Michigan, 1830-1860: The Second Coming in the Third New England* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edward Mellen Press, 1989), 70-91; David L. Rowe, "Northern Millerites and Virginia Millennialists, 1828-1847" (M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1972); Robert W. Olson, "Southern Baptists' Reactions to Millerism" (Th.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972).

⁷²Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets*, 118-131.

concluded, Millerism itself became formalist as the moderates separated themselves from the radicals and organized sects began emerging.⁷³

R. Laurence Moore also found Miller's apocalypticism "in less precise versions constantly reiterated in popular literature" and saw no necessary divorce between millenarianism and reform.⁷⁴ Although Michael Barkun drew a sharper line between Millerism and reform, he regarded the Millerites as working within a respectable tradition of New England protestantism.⁷⁵ Like Rowe, Barkun found the Millerites largely reflecting their surrounding population, associated with urbanized and economically developed areas, and sociologically and economically middle-class.⁷⁶

Especially interested in why millennialism became so popular at this time, Barkun pointed to a series of natural calamities between 1810 and 1832, including floods in 1811, "spotted-fever" and cerebro-meningitis outbreaks in 1813, the "year without a summer" in 1816, more floods in 1826 and 1830, and a cholera epidemic in 1832. Added to these were such socioeconomic developments as the depressions of 1837 and 1839, the commercialization of agriculture, and the resulting separation of male and female roles. These occurrences, he argued, meant that hill farms were no longer tenable, the rural population was pushed westward, and a concern for the spiritual state of the people developed, all of which created the conditions for such a movement as Millerism.⁷⁷ Barkun concluded that "Second Adventism and utopian community building may be conceived as the end stage of a process through which human groups seek to accommodate collective stress."⁷⁸

Barkun also noted that the Millerite approach to understanding reality, which saw "progress [as] a mirage, calamity and conflict the norm, and stability an illusion," contrasted with American confidence in the power of the individual will and belief in gradual improvement.⁷⁹ This argument, which pointed toward the answer to the dilemma that historians of the Millerites were increasingly facing—if they were so

⁷³Ibid, 72, 158. See also Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 56, 101.

⁷⁴R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 132.

⁷⁵Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 21-23, 126-128.

⁷⁶Ibid., 33, 42-43.

⁷⁷Ibid., 103-123.

⁷⁸Ibid., 142.

⁷⁹Ibid., 48.

much like their culture why were the Millerites so vilified—was further developed by Ruth Alden Doan.

Although noting the similarities between the Millerites and American culture, particularly moralism and literalism, Doan extended her argument presented at the 1984 conference, stating that Americans regarded the Millerites as heretical because their hope was immediate rather than progressive and based on supernatural rather than mediating factors.⁸⁰ “The movement became a heresy,” she stated, “because it emphasized one side of evangelicalism when the dominant center of American religious culture was shifting to another set of emphases,” namely a move from radical supernaturalism to immanence.⁸¹

Again, similar to the “boundless” or “antiformalist” interpretations of Butler and Rowe, Doan noted the tensions between the Millerites and the “tightening up” of acceptable implications of the possibilities of American independence, religious liberty, Jacksonian democracy, and the Second Great Awakening.⁸² The radical character of the Millerites, which historians had “tamed” over some five decades of scholarship since Francis Nichol’s *The Midnight Cry*, was now reasserting itself, although in a more critical and precise manner than the tales that had culminated in Clara E. Sears’s *Days of Delusion*.

George R. Knight titled his study of the Millerite movement *Millennial Fever*, thereby capturing its now increasingly recognized radical nature.⁸³ Reflecting the scholarship of the past several decades, Knight viewed the Millerites as an extension of the Second Great Awakening and William Miller “as perhaps the most successful revivalist of the last phase” of the Awakening.⁸⁴ Believing that socioeconomic factors cannot fully explain the Millerite phenomenon, Knight argued that the certainty that Christ was coming soon, buttressed by mathematical calculation, “catapulted” them into a “preaching frenzy.”⁸⁵

Knight’s narrative described the growing radicalism of the movement. As the predicted time of Christ’s coming became increasingly

⁸⁰Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 82, 201, 215-216.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 227.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 227-228.

⁸³George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Survey of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1993).

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 22-23, 65.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 24. Grant Underwood argues that there was considerable similarity between Millerite premillennialism and that of an even more radical group, the Mormons. See Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 112-126.

important in 1843-44, a new group led by George Storrs and Charles Fitch began to replace Miller, Joshua V. Himes, and Josiah Litch.⁸⁶ With the failure of Christ to come in the spring of 1844, the "Seventh-Month" movement arose, led by Samuel Snow and Storrs, predicting that Christ would come on October 22, 1844, accompanied by an increase in extremism among certain Millerite elements. Finally, after the "Great Disappointment" a new wave of radicalism emerged, in the hands of which "Adventism lost its traditional rational identity."⁸⁷ Reacting against this fanaticism, the moderate Adventists gradually organized their churches and the sabbatarian Adventists "disentangled" themselves from "*the midst of the fanatical element.*"⁸⁸

In a very real sense Knight's book marks the converging of a century and a half of discussion. After thousands of pages of Adventist apologetics had sought to deny the radical character of the Millerites and had largely won their case with the historians, a Seventh-day Adventist scholar and a Seventh-day Adventist publishing house now were arguing that the Millerites were indeed radical. At the same time, however, this very radicalism was regarded as rooted in both Protestant tradition and the American culture of the first half of the nineteenth century, as scholars of a variety of persuasions had demonstrated. The ascension robes and other Millerite tales may not have had an evidential basis, but ultimately the Millerites could not be tamed. The stage is set for a new generation of scholars to forge new questions and provide new perspectives on this movement that is both within and without the American tradition.

⁸⁶Ibid., 125-258.

⁸⁷Ibid., 125-266.

⁸⁸Ibid., 297.