ASCENSION ROBES
and Other Millerite Fables

The Millerites in American Literature

BY JAMES EHRLICH
Early in the 19th century James Fenimore Cooper complained that in America “there are no annals for the historian; no follies (beyond the most vulgar and commonplace) for the satirist; no manners for the dramatists; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; no gross and hardy offenses against decorum for the moralist; nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of poetry.”

By the 1830s and 1840s all this had changed, however. Not only had American writers—largely with Cooper’s help—discovered the Indian, frontiersman, and American nature as themes for their literature, but the “freedom’s ferment” of the Jacksonian period had created some of the social diversity that Cooper had felt necessary for great literature. Along with the utopians, abolitionists, and feminists who caught the attention of writers both great and common, the Millerites stimulated a reaction of humor and sympathy.

Not surprisingly, the Millerite prediction of a date for Christ’s coming caught the fancy of the fiction writers.

The Millerites, of course, were followers of William Miller, the New York Baptist farmer who interpreted the biblical book of Daniel to mean that Christ would return sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. Miller preached these ideas widely in the 1830s and 1840s, attracting perhaps as many as 50,000 believers. After Miller’s predictions failed to come to pass, Samuel S. Snow, one of his followers, re-examined Daniel, determined that Miller had made a mistake, and announced that Christ would come on October 22, 1844. This prophecy rekindled the hopes of the Millerites, hopes that were dashed as October 22 came and passed without special event. As a result, the movement began to break apart amidst a flood of scorn and abuse.
Not surprisingly, the Millerite prediction of a date for Christ's coming caught the fancy of the fiction writers. In the fictional view, time setting gained acceptance among the credulous by its impressive mathematical calculations. Edward Eggleston, a former Methodist minister, portrayed Millerism in *The End of the World* as an exciting diversion for bored village folk. As Eggleston told it, since there were no circuses or murders to divert the people's attention, they flock to hear Elder Hankins when he comes into Sugar Grove announcing that the world will end at midnight, August 11, 1843. It is his calculation that makes Hankins' prediction incontrovertible, at least to most people, for he argues that "figgers won't lie noways, and it's figgers that shows this yet to be the last yey of the world, and that the final end of all things is approachin'." He does not ask people to listen to any of his own impressions or reasonings, only that they just "listen to the voice of the man in the linen-coat what spoke to Dan'el, and then listen to the voice of the 'rithmetic, and to a sum in simple addition, the simplest sort of addition."

Everyone seems to believe Hankins, however, except Jonas, a new hired hand on one of the local farms. One night at Elder Hankins' meeting at the church, Jonas comments to a friend:

"Looky there, won't you? He'll cipher the world into nothin' in no time. He's like the feller that tried to find out the value of a fat shoat when wood was two dollars a cord. 'Ef I can't do it by subtraction I'll do it by long-division," say he. And of this 'rithmetic preacher can't make a finishment of this subliminary speer by addition, he'll do it by multiplyin'. They's only one answer in his book. Gin him any sum you please, and it all comes out 1843!"

Jonas complains that July fourths are all over along with shooting firecrackers and the star-spangled banner because Hankins "ciphers and ciphers and then spits on his slate and wipes us all out. Whenever Gabb'el blows I'll believe it, but I won't take none o' Hankins tootin' in place of it."

The calculating aspect also appeared in Mary E. Wilkins' story of "A New England Prophet." Again, a skeptic comments that the Millerite has to "twist passages hindmost, foremost, and bottomside up, an' add, an' subtract, an' divide, an' multiply, an' hammer, an' saw, an' bile down, an' take to a gristmill" before he gets the desired meaning. These two stories were written toward the end of the 19th century, but specific dates also appeared in Asmodeus' *The Millerite Humbug* and C. A. P's "A Millerite Miracle" that were contemporary with the Millerite movement. So strong was the date-setting image of Millerism in fiction that it occurred as late as 1972 when Henry Carlisle mentioned it in *Voyage to the First of December*.

Time setting had a basis in historical fact, but the ascension robes that many authors brought into their stories seem to be mostly fictional. Not that they were originally regarded that way, however. After October 22, 1844, several newspapers carried the story that prepared their ascension robes to be lifted up in clouds of glory while the worn-out, weary world was to burn with fire," and then [be] renewed. Edward Eggleston also briefly noted that "some made ascension robes" as the religious excitement reached its climax on August 11, 1843. Similarly, Mary E. Wilkins' Millerite prophet, Solomon, admonishes his followers to "Repent, Repent! Prepare your ascension robes. Renounce the world, and all

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**THE MILLERITE HUMBUG; OR THE Raising of the Wind!!**

**A Comedy IN FIVE ACTS, AS PERFORMED WITH UNBOUNDED APPLAUSE IN BOSTON AND OTHER PARTS OF THE UNION!**

**COMPILED AND ARRANGED BY ASMODEUS IN AMERICA, OR THE DEVIL ON TWO STICKS.**

**BOSTON: PRINTED FOR THE PUBLISHER. 1845.**

This satirical Millerite play ironically may have been performed in the Boston Tabernacle erected by the Millerites in 1843 and sold in 1845 to an organization for theatrical productions.

The Millerites had worn ascension robes on that fateful night while awaiting the coming of their Lord. As far as can be determined, though, little of this sort happened.

Nevertheless, the reports of ascension robes first made their way into fiction in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's short story "Kavanaugh," in 1849. The story refers to Millerites as a fanatical group that "had pre-

the lust and the vanity thereof." As the Millerites head for the hill to "ascend," their neighbors peep through their curtains "to see the white-robed figures move along the road. Every now and then little children would shriek in terror at the sight of them."

In her story "The Last Day," Marietta Holley imaginatively described how the robes were made and worn. Patterned after night-
gowns and made of white book muslin, the robe was full round the neck with sleeves hanging down like wings. At a quarter to four on June 30, 1843, two of Holley's characters, Pelek and Miss Coon, put on their robes and wait for their ascension at 4:00 p.m., the appointed hour. As the great moment draws near, Pelek climbs on a high tree stump and Miss Coon stands on a chair, both eager to be nearer heaven. Then at 4:00 everyone shouts and screams while Pelek and Miss Coon wave their arms. With their two great white wings “a flitterin’,” they “sprung upwards, expectin’ the hull world, livin’ and dead would foller ... and go right up into heaven singing,”

Farewell my friends,
Farewell my foes;
Up to heaven
Pearly Jackson goes.”

Alas, what goes up comes down; since Miss Coon jumps from a chair she receives only bruises, whereas Pelek is laid up for several days with broken bones.

Underneath the date setting and ascension robes, however, lay the fact that fiction writers portrayed the Millerites, in the words of John Greenleaf Whittier, as “a class of uncultivated, and in some cases, gross minds.” This belief that the Millerites were uneducated apparently prompted the extensive use of dialect in the stories. Some writers also distinguished the leaders and followers, picturing unscrupulous preachers taking advantage of their uncultivated listeners. For example, a play titled The Millerite Humbug; or the Raising of the Wind clearly presented Millenism as a fraud perpetrated upon the ignorant masses.

The author, writing under the pseudonym “Asmodeus in America” in 1845, stated that he wrote the play because of his “conviction that many have been deluded and finally ruined by this popular frenzy.” He hoped his work “might awaken some who are still slumbering in this Humbug.” His prologue begins:

You've often heard, my friend, no doubt of me,
Of my grand plan and scheme of '43—
This is the modern way to Raise the Wind,
To gull the folks and humbug all mankind!
Be not severe and do not quick condemn—
I've many friends, that rank with honest men.

My name is known in evry Town and State, And with the World, for humbug can compete.
But as the order of the day is gain, I trust you will not my great plot disdain.
If it should merit your applause, once more I'd try and gull them with year '44!

Along with the utopians, abolitionists, and feminists who caught the attention of writers both great and common, the Millerites stimulated a reaction of humor and sympathy.

In the play, “The Great Leader’s” prediction having failed for 1843, he moves the date ahead to 1844, meanwhile encouraging the believers to bring their money and jewelry to fill the treasury. Their wealth is unnecessary to them, he argues, since they will be “going up.” Furthermore, they cannot ascend unless they give their money to the “Great Leader.” “As You Say,” a fellow humbugger, observes, “It is surprising that people can be duped in this way.” If the Advent did not occur in 1844, then the “Great Leader” plans to move the date ahead to 1846, for this gives two more years to fill the treasury and run away. But the Millenites finally discover the plan to delude them and demand their property and money back. Thus “such a band of jobbers and a gang of robbers” can no longer raise the wind. Similarly, the anonymous author of “A Millerite Miracle” called William Miller “the arch deceiver ... and humbug.”

But whatever the motivation of the Millenite leaders, the people who followed them impressed the fiction writers with their credulity. In “A Millerite Miracle,” the women grow pale from fasting and praying in preparation for the Coming after the Morning Hour and Noontide Yell, fictional Millenite papers, circulate through their villages. As the author continues his story, this gullibility provides the opportunity for a practical joke. On April 3, 1844, a group of Millenites meet on the outskirts of a small town in the state of Hoosieriana for the “[grand] and lofty tumbling” or Second Coming. Among those assembled is Sam, a free Negro, who had managed to sneak into the meeting against the wishes of the leader. Cabe Newham, a local prankster, and his friends are also there, but for mischievous rather than religious reasons. That morning, Cabe had thrown a half-inch rope over a tree branch that hung directly over the meeting place. Now with the excitement “getting about eighty pounds to the inch,” Cabe slips into the crowd, grabs the end of the rope and ties it to Sam’s belt as best he can. All of a sudden, in the dim light of the evening, Sam exclaims. “Gor Almighty! Ise a goin’ up! Who-o-o!” and sure enough, Sam is seen “mounting into the ethereal blue.” Some faint, others pray, and “not a few dropped their robes and slid.”

Another example of this Millenite credulity was the element of superstition that appeared in Eggleston’s End of the World where a Millenite farmer, Samuel Anderson, plants his crops “in the light of the moon and his potatoes in the dark of the orb” and kills “his hogs when the moon was on the increase lest the meat should go to gravy.” He also guards carefully “against the carrying of a hoe through the house, for fear somebody might die.”

The naivete of the Millenites appeared most fully, however, in their actions during the last days, particularly in their neglect of worldly affairs as they prepare for the ascension. In Wilkins’ A New England Prophet, the Millenites become slack in following their daily routines. One finds that “kitchen tables [were] piled high with unwashed dishes, the hearths unswept and the fires low, the pantry shelves were bare and often the children went to bed with only the terrors of the judgment for sustenance.” Farmers do not feed their cattle, leaving them to stand near the fences bowing piteously. Worldly delights lose their appeal in the light of eternity when Simeon, a skeptic, asks Mrs. Solomon for a piece of mince pie. She answers shrieking, “I shall make no more pies in this world, Simeon Lennox. ... Woe be to you if you think of such things in the face of death and eternal condemnation!”

Doubting that his brother Solomon believes in the Second Coming, Simeon says, “Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll put ye to the test.” Since Solomon has been predicting the end of the world to happen next Thursday, earthly goods are unnecessary. Therefore, Simeon challenges, “S’pose—you give me a deed of this ‘ere farm? ... Me to take possession by daylight next Friday mornin’, if the world don’t come to an end Thursday night.” Solomon just glares at his brother, wondering what to do. Finally, with a look of hostility and bitterness, he agrees. They hire a lawyer to draw up the papers and all is set—until the Second Coming next Thursday. But on Friday the sun rises bright as ever, and Simeon is a property owner. Later on Simeon deeds the land
To many of the writers, the Great Disappointment only underlined the ridiculousness of the original prediction, thus providing an additional source for humor. But for the sensitive observers, the humor was mixed with pathos and tragedy as they attempted to understand the Millerite experience.

This article was originally written as a graduate school project at Andrews University and appeared in the Summer 1975 issue of Adventist Heritage. James M. Erlieh has worked as a junior academy teacher in Minnesota, and is currently a computer specialist for the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. He lives in Eureka, Montana. The article is reprinted by permission from the author and Adventist Heritage.

Books
Asmodeus in America [pseud.], The Millerite Humbug; or the Raising of the Wind. Boston: Printed for Publisher, 1845.

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