

REVIEWS

History from an Adventist Perspective

GARY LAND

1844: RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENTS

By Jerome B. Clark

Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Publishing Association 1968 volume 1,
396 pp; volume 2, 368 pp; volume 3, 240 pp each \$7.95 per set
\$21.95

81

In these volumes the author, a professor of history at Southern Missionary College (Tennessee), attempts to portray the great religious, social, and intellectual activity of the age that produced the Millerite movement. Although for many years Seventh-day Adventist ministers have attested to their belief that much of this activity constituted a battle by Satan to defeat the cause of truth, one looks to the professional historian for a full understanding of the historical context of the 1844 movement. Such a work could contribute to a clearer view of the origins of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Unfortunately, Clark falls rather short of success.

Based almost entirely on secondary sources, his work leads one to expect that it will be a synthesis of previous historical scholarship. However, in nearly every case Clark draws on his sources for facts rather than for historical interpretation. Seldom does he consider how these historians have explained the existence and meaning of the movements he treats.

This fact suggests the central flaw in these volumes. Aside from pointing out that these activities have a common focal point in the year 1844, the author fails to construct an interpretative framework by which to draw together such diverse movements as Millerism, social welfare, abolitionism, and the peace crusade. Sometimes he even loses sight of 1844. For instance, in his discussion of higher criticism, within the space of fourteen pages he ranges from the second century to 1954. Significantly, in that particular chapter he does not even mention two tremendously important works on the life of Christ (those by Ernst Renan and David Straus) that fall within his period of emphasis.

Content with a chronological summary of events, Clark offers little explanation of why they took place. His comment on several abolitionists is typical: "Interestingly enough, they were as deeply involved in the temperance, peace, and women's rights movements as in antislavery. This was a characteristic of many antislavery reformers" (1, p. 66). Instead of merely noting the characteristic, the historian should seek to determine why these men were involved in such a wide spectrum of reform.

But Clark, although tracing the impact of antislavery on such centers of evangelicalism as Oberlin College, does not make use of the thesis that Western evangelical revivalism had an important role in the origins of antislavery¹ and reform in general.² Nor does he give attention to the idea that the reformers were a displaced social elite striving to assert the traditional values and social position of their class.³ By neglecting such approaches, he virtually ignores the social and economic background of the movements he studies, and thus he offers no reason why they arose around 1844.⁴

Furthermore, the author does not show how the idea of progress permeated these movements. Occasionally he draws from a historian who uses this concept (2, p. 321; 3, p. 36), but never does he develop it. I do not wish to suggest what Clark's thesis should have been, but the idea of progress might well have proved a fruitful, unifying theme for the material he presents. Use of it might have shown more clearly the fundamental difference between (a) the Millerites' basic assumption that the increasingly corrupt world could be saved only by the Second Coming and (b) the dominant world view that a perfect society could be achieved on this earth.

When Clark does venture into the realm of interpretation, he raises historiographical problems of immense dimensions. Like the ministers mentioned earlier, he invokes the hand of God or Satan to explain the existence of certain developments. He calls the Millerite movement "ordained of God" (1, p. 60) and attests to his belief that Miller will rise in the first resurrection (1, p. 64). Concerning early manifestations of the prophetic gift within Adventism, Clark writes that God tried to use William Foy as his "agent to carry prophetic messages, but he [Foy] had failed the trust" (1, p. 73).

Turning to spiritualism, the author states: "The monstrous lies perpetrated by spiritualism are the work of Satan himself. The archdeceiver comes to men in the guise of spirits, using his evil angels as his agents of deception, and teaches that there is no difference between evil and righteousness, and that there is no judgment of the wicked" (1, p. 371).

And, finally, on evolution: "This phenomenon of acceptance is inexplicable except in connection with prophetic movements. Evolution arose as the counterfeit to the Sabbath and the Bible truths just at the time of the rise of the Advent Movement. It was born at the same time because Satan feared the Advent Movement and did not want its truths to be taught. While the Sabbath, the sanctuary, and the Spirit of Prophecy were being developed as distinctive Seventh-day Adventist doctrines and teachings, the theory of evolution was arising to destroy these very truths in the minds of scientists, theologians, and laymen. The real and the counterfeit were developed at the same time" (3, p. 173).

Most professional historians would be uncomfortable with such historical writing, for during the past century they have sought to develop a historical method that is based on known quantities. Realizing that no one can fully understand causation, they nevertheless believe that interpretation must be tied to documentary evidence; otherwise historiography will once again sink into irresponsible speculation and superstition.

In the face of this attitude, what position should the Christian historian take?

Clark obviously holds that the historian is justified in using the supernatural to explain earthly events. But man has such an incomplete understanding of the relation-

ship of supernatural powers to earthly happenings that, apart from divine revelation, he can have no firm support for his ideas.

The Christian historian recognizes that the supernatural can and does have a role in human affairs, but that men's finite minds are incapable of determining the specific nature of that role. In humbleness, he realizes that his explanations are partial and that only in eternity can he hope to find answers to some of his burning questions. Furthermore, if the Christian historian expects to gain the attentive hearing of the historical profession, he cannot indulge in theological predilections. Such a hearing, I am afraid, will not be accorded Clark's work.

On the other hand, I do not necessarily mean that the Christian historian's work is no different from that of his nonchristian colleague. Christianity is a historical religion, basing its evidence to a large degree on historical events. It offers an interpretation of human nature and a morality by which to judge human actions. It denies the idea of progress, stating instead that mankind's decline will be ended only by Christ's Second Coming. In this light, it seems, the Christian historian can have a unique perspective unavailable to the nonchristian.

83

Ellen White writes: "Let the youth study these records, and see how the true prosperity of nations has been bound up with an acceptance of the divine principles. Let him study the history of the great reformatory movements, and see how often these principles, though despised and hated, their advocates brought to the dungeon and scaffold, have through these very sacrifices triumphed."⁵ This statement suggests that the peculiarity of a Christian historical perspective is characterized not by attributing causation to the supernatural but by one's interests and the questions one asks.

Clark follows this approach to some extent, for few but a Seventh-day Adventist historian would examine the years under consideration by placing the Millerite movement at their center. By doing so he reveals that a significant number of people did not accept the idea of progress. Moreover, while higher criticism and the evolutionary theory were breaking down Christian faith, he suggests, scientific advances provided improved means by which Christians could communicate the gospel to the world. But because he does not develop these ideas, Clark's contribution is limited.

Another problem Clark's method raises is that he often seems to write Adventist apologetics instead of history. Rather than criticizing Mormon and Spiritualist beliefs on the basis of a few Bible texts (1, pp. 125-126, 328-330), he might have examined the criticisms that their contemporaries made. This approach would have had the advantage of probing further into the ideas of the time while avoiding the implication that the book is a religious tract.

The chapter entitled "The Impact of Evolution on Religious Thought" reveals this problem most fully. For fourteen of the twenty-five pages Clark explains current creationist philosophy, following with a cursory outline of the development of evolutionary theory. In his zeal to explain creationism he forgets the purpose of his chapter, for he virtually neglects the controversy over evolution in the Christian churches. By so doing he misses an opportunity to make an important contribution to our understanding of this period. Out of his sympathy for their problems Clark might have examined the ideas of Agassiz and other Christians more closely, asking why they did not incorporate new scientific findings into a responsible, biblically oriented theory of creationism.

In addition to the problem of content, Clark's volumes leave much to be desired stylistically. Portions of his work reveal that Clark can write well; but there are many abrupt transitions, listings, quotations, and repetitive phrases. Occasionally Clark tries to cover too much material. His treatment of higher criticism degenerates into a nearly unreadable listing of names, with a sentence or two of description after each. One would expect this in a reference book, but good history is literature and has no place for such writing.

Although generally accurate, Clark is also sometimes liable to error. He identifies the first Negroes sold at Jamestown as slaves (2, p. 15), whereas the evidence indicates that they were equivalent to indentured servants. He implies that the term *fundamentalist* existed in the 1830s and 1840s (1, p. 260), whereas historians generally date the word from 1909. Within the space of two pages he gives two different figures for the number of blind people in the world at present (2, pp. 289-290). And his chapter on nativism might be more accurately titled anti-Catholicism, for in emphasizing its religious aspect he gives little attention to the remaining complex of ideas and emotions that made up the nativist movement. However, he does make a careful distinction between antipapalism and anti-Catholicism (1, pp. 203-204).

These errors are minor, however, when compared with the problems of methodology and style which appear, in large part, to have resulted from a very hurried job of research and writing. Gordon Madgwick's introduction to volume one indicates that the author spent about a year and a half doing research and seven weeks writing the manuscript. Although Clark presents an impressive bibliography, he does not seem to have digested the ideas of the historians whose books he used. Had he spent more time thinking about his findings and more time writing and polishing his manuscript, he might well have produced something truly valuable to both Seventh-day Adventists and the historical profession.

As they stand, these volumes, bringing together a body of material otherwise not accessible to the nonhistorian, perform a limited service to the members of the Adventist church. But when regarded in the light of what might have been accomplished, they are disappointing. They reveal that Clark is a committed and sincere Christian; one wishes that he had held the standards of historical scholarship as high.

Clark has apparently already begun work on a new study entitled *The Temperance Movement in Great Britain and America*. We shall be interested to see if he grapples more successfully with the problems his recent work raises.

REFERENCES

- 1 Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc. 1933).
- 2 Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York: Harper Torchbook 1965).
- 3 David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era*, first edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1956).
- 4 Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper Torchbook 1965).
- 5 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1942), p. 238.