
A New Look at the Old Days: Adventist History Comes of Age

by Benjamin McArthur

Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, editors, *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). 235 pp.

Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986) 194 pp.

Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 206 pp.

Clyde E. Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning* (Charlotte: Venture Books, 1983), 326 pp.

Gary Land, editor, *Adventism in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1986), 301 pp.

David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850*, AAR Studies in Religion No. 38 (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1985), 188 pp.

The Seventh-day Adventist church has had an uneasy relationship with its own history. Like most institutions, ours is comfortable with celebratory accounts but avoids objective self-scrutiny. The unsparing method of social-science analysis is particularly threatening, for it seems to carry an implied rejection of special claims to revealed truth. Other religious groups share this aversion. Yet the burden of history weighs especially heavy upon Adventists simply because we are a movement born from the preaching of history's end. We now approach the 144th anniversary of the Great Disappointment. The symbolism of that number may stir apocalyptic visions in the minds of some, but for most Adventists it issues an invitation to doubt. How do we explain to ourselves, let alone to others, the meaning of that event at the heart of our creation?

The books under review here represent a very

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different kind of Adventist history than we have traditionally known. Only one of these works is apologetic in tone, and that one (*Midnight and Morning*) comes from an Advent Christian historian. The others are thoroughly scholarly in tone, seek their audience primarily among the academic community, and partake of no special pleading for any religious tradition. Also worth noting is the confluence of interest in Millerism among both Adventist and non-Adventist historians. Seventh-day Adventists authored or edited only two of the six books. Three of the six come from the pen of scholars with no apparent connection to any variety of Adventism. We must therefore seek to account for this newfound attention to Millerism from different quarters.

In the broader American historical community Millerism has traditionally been seen as a fringe phenomenon, a kind of "comic relief" from the complex events of Jacksonian America, as David Rowe put it. This attitude doubtless owes much to Clara Sears's undeservedly influential *Days of Delusion* (1924). Consequently, one could scan

general treatments of antebellum America and find only the briefest mention of William Miller and his message. This has changed considerably in the wake of the revolution wrought by social historians. Popular movements now assume greater importance as windows into the varieties of Jacksonian religious culture, more telling perhaps than elite communities such as Hopedale or Brook Farm. The works of Ruth Doan and Michael Barkun reflect this new perspective. It is also telling that a recent American history survey text headlines Millerism in a column heading, something I suspect has not happened before.

If secular historians have discovered a new importance to Millerism, Adventist scholars have indicated a new willingness to approach their tradition analytically. History books always tell two stories: one regards the events the book relates, the customary focus of our reading; the other, read more indirectly, concerns the era in which the book was written. From this perspective one can see works such as *The Disappointed* and *Adventism in America* as reflecting the further maturation of an intellectual class in the Adventist church. Until recently the vanguard of Adventist historians spoke primarily to their church, reinterpreting the nature of Ellen White's inspiration. This task is largely finished. Though it is still unclear where the revisionism will lead the church, there remains little question that this work has forever altered thoughtful opinion on the matter. However, the books considered here represent a heightened desire to make Adventist history reputable in the non-Adventist scholarly community.

Millerites Did Not Begin as Fanatics

Vern Carner and Ronald Numbers have certainly been key figures in both of these tasks. As entrepreneurs of Adventist history, they have done more than anyone to invigorate denominational history. Numbers's *Prophets of Health* (1976) pioneered attempts

to write Adventist history for a secular audience, even as it stirred contentious debate in the church. Vern Carner's labors included the founding of *Adventist Heritage* and organization of a history lecture series at Loma Linda that collectively was published as *The Rise of Adventism* (1974). *The Disappointed* likewise originated as a conference, this one at Killington, Vermont. Appropriately, Ronald Numbers provided much of the organizational push for the conference, and the subsequent volume is dedicated to Vern Carner in recognition of his past efforts.

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Five of the six books here reviewed deal primarily with Millerism. These will be discussed first. Probably of greatest interest to *Spectrum* readers will be *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Ronald Numbers and Jonathan Butler. A well-illustrated and attractive volume, including a full-size color facsimile of Charles Fitch and Apollos Hale's prophetic chart, it contains 11 essays by both Adventist and non-Adventist scholars who are leaders in the field of Millerite studies. The author of two of the books reviewed here, Ruth Alden Doan and Michael Barkun, preview their works in essays among the 11. The sixth book I will comment on, *Adventism in America*, spans the history of our denomination and will be considered by itself at the end of the review.

What do we now know about William Miller, his message, and his following? We know that Millerism appealed to a diverse following. David Rowe has examined this matter the most thoroughly, first in his book *Thunder and Trumpets*, and more recently in the opening chapter of *The Disappointed*. He discovered that Millerites, far from being the economically marginal and dispossessed people sometimes thought, came from

all walks of life, including industry and professional life. They came out of various denominations (with Methodists and Baptists predominant) and lived in cities, small towns, and rural areas. In short, they were as a group indistinguishable from their unpersuaded neighbors. Admittedly, these conclusions come from a rather small sample of Millerites. We will probably never have the evidence to draw the kind of social portrait that Paul Johnson compiled for the Rochester, New York, revival of the early 1830s. I would part company, however, with Rowe's conclusion in his book that "no coherent Millerite personality existed at all." It is difficult to imagine individuals sharing such an intense and all-encompassing belief without coming to exhibit common qualities. Indeed, Rowe's more recent essay in *The Disappointed* seems to allow for a cultural bonding based upon a shared Yankeeeness, a commitment to action, and particularly a deep longing for the millennial reunion with God.

Perhaps the most significant revisionist theme to emerge in these books is the assertion that Millerites did not represent a fanatical wing of American Protestantism. Rather, they should be seen as part of the evangelical mainstream, an idiosyncratic part to be sure, but still sharing most features with other American Christians. The thread of continuity tying together most of *The Disappointed's* 11 essays is the assumption that Millerism illumines a host of antebellum social movements, from abolitionism to Shaker and Oneida perfectionism. The Adventist tradition, in short, is here endowed with respectability as part of the great tradition of American reform movements.

Ronald and Janet Numbers remove one of the oldest albatrosses from about Millerism in their essay on "Millerism and Madness." Nineteenth-century commentators leaped on oft-repeated charges that asylums were filled with unhinged Millerites as evidence of the detrimental effect of Miller's teachings. But after scrutinizing records of New England asylums they conclude that though apocalyptic preaching might have attracted some unbalanced types, it was rarely responsible for mental breakdown.

On the other hand, Eric Anderson warns

against an excessive taming of the Millerite movement. His case history of Millerite prophetic interpretation regarding the fall of Turkey in 1840 reveals a radical streak at the core of Adventism. Josiah Litch's understanding of Revelation's sixth trumpet led to predictions that Turkey's fall would be a key herald of the end of time. That events only fitfully fulfilled these expectations scarcely slowed claims of vindication. There was a "fast and loose" quality to prophetic exegesis, urged on by a nearly desperate desire for the final appointment of events, which belied Miller's air of rational calculation.

From Insiders to Outsiders

Ruth Alden Doan's recent book, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism and American Culture*, finds the Millerites to be exemplary evangelicals in a religious culture that was beginning to shed some tenets of the evangelical faith. In this regard early Adventists were both traditional and yet extreme. Miller's approach to biblical interpretation, his belief in a soon Second Coming, his (and particularly Joshua V. Himes's) revival techniques—all exhibited the customary evangelical manifestations of the 1830s and 1840s. Yet the movement aroused sharp antipathy among Protestant denominations. Why?

Doan explains the reaction as the establishment of new boundaries of orthodoxy within the Protestant world. Miller's biblicism and sense of radical supernaturalism now seemed an embarrassment to mainline Christians. Moreover, the belief that God must destroy the world by fire and start creation afresh violated new theological tenets even among some evangelicals, who stressed God's immanence and His reliance upon human agency to effect the gradual transformation of society. Millerites, then, may have begun as insiders, but their insistence upon a literal reading of prophecy marked them as outsiders to a Protestant America beginning its long run toward theological liberalism.

Doan's book is refreshing in its study of early Adventism not for apologetic or antiquarian pur-

poses but for how it illuminates major cultural trends of 19th-century America. Millerite connections with contemporaneous reform groups are likewise explored by other authors in *The Disappointed*. Ron Graybill finds that various important Millerite leaders had distinguished abolitionist credentials. That abolitionism and Millerism may have resembled each other in their psychological appeal to individuals is clearly possible: deep conviction leading to “come-outerism” and a quest for personal holiness is found in both. Still, once these individuals moved from concern for slavery to eschatology they did little to support abolitionism. Priorities had changed, and denouncing social evils seemed less compelling.

Just as William Miller recruited important followers from the struggle against slavery, so discouraged Millerites occasionally moved to other utopian sects. Lawrence Foster has located a group of over 200 Millerites who joined a Shaker community in Ohio. Foster notes that despite considerable differences in theology, Shakers and Millerites both experienced disappointment in the mid-1840s. Moreover, for those Millerites who could not face a return to their original churches the supportive Shaker communities appeared attractive. The Shakers’ symbolic interpretation of Christ’s second advent found a sympathetic ear among those people for whom Miller’s literalism now seemed unpromising. Even so, the Millerite converts proved fickle, most leaving their new homes when the burden of celibacy weighed too heavily.

A more extended discussion of Millerism’s relation to other millennial movements comes from Michael Barkun’s *Crucible of the Millennium*. The book is useful in several respects. It provides a concise review of millenarian scholarship. It also places Millerism in the context of various religious utopias of the age, Shakers, Fourierists, Owenites, and John Humphrey Noyes’s Oneida Community. No book better conveys the sense of early Adventists as a part of an outbreak of reform utopias. More extensively than Lawrence Foster, Michael Barkun reveals the web of connection between these groups, including movement of individuals from one

group to another. He stresses the essential distinctiveness of Millerism in rejecting the prevailing postmillennialism of the others.

In these respects *Crucible of the Millennium* carries conviction. But questionable judgments detract. Barkun argues unconvincingly that natural disasters in the 1810s created conditions favorable to the rise of Millerism while social and

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economic upheavals of the 1830s left Millerite leaders bewildered and unable to respond effectively.

Problems arise both with the implied causal links and with the assertion that other utopian groups gave inherently more satisfactory answers to social problems. It is difficult to see how the communitarian groups who chose withdrawal from society exemplified either a more coherent or more efficacious response than did Millerites to basic human dilemmas.

Part of Barkun’s problem may be his failure to establish adequate standards for assessing success in these matters. For example he faults the Millerites for attempting extensive urban evangelism with a message he deems incompatible with urban society. But Millerites did in fact enjoy success in a number of cities. Moreover, Barkun’s criticism ignores the strongest imperative of Millerism: that the gospel be preached to all. The functional analysis of *Crucible of the Millennium*, like Paul Johnson’s *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium* and Whitney Cross’s older but still useful *The Burned-Over District*, allows us to see how religious movements operate in a social system. But an annoying reductionism accompanies these works, as though the profound stirrings of religion were merely epiphenomenal.

If social historians encourage us to think of Millerism in terms of behavior, we must not neglect the man at its center. Are we any nearer an

understanding of William Miller, the self-taught exegete who inspired one of the greatest popular religious movements of the 19th century? We still await a scholarly biography of the man, a fact that in itself needs explanation. But we have a good start in Wayne Judd's thoughtful, short sketch in *The Disappointed*. He describes Miller's bout with skepticism, his nearly fatal participation in the War of 1812, his dramatic conversion to Baptist belief, and finally, his illumination into the mysteries of biblical prophecy. For all of that Miller remains a rather flat figure in a historical terrain of grand relief. The ease with which Miller fades into the shadows of his own movement reminds us that Millerism was not a millennialism dependent upon a charismatic center. As Judd concedes and David Arthur develops in the book's following chapter, Joshua V. Himes may claim credit for making Miller's message a religious phenomenon. In Arthur's words, "Himes took Miller out of rural and small-town America and introduced him to the major cities." He organized a cadre of preachers and editors, oversaw the issuing of millions of copies of Millerite literature, and convened conferences and camp meetings. Considered alongside the timely contributions of Josiah Litch, Charles Fitch, S. S. Snow, and others, one realizes that Millerism's strength rested in the talents of many.

From Millerites to Seventh-day Adventists

The final essay in *The Disappointed* provides a bridge from Millerism to Seventh-day Adventism. Jonathan Butler's "The Making of New Order" is something of a *tour de force*, the best interpretive essay we have on Millerism's transition to denominationalism. Butler borrows historian John Higham's notion of the middle decades of the last century witnessing a cultural reordering from a sense of boundlessness to one of consolidation. Jacksonian America, with its panoply of social reforms, experimental religious groups, political agitations, and terri-

torial expansiveness, represented American romanticism in full flower. There was a sense of freedom from conventional rules; reform proceeded in a confidence that individuals and society were equally malleable and capable of perfection. Millerism manifested this boundless spirit perfectly. Though without faith in humanity's capacity for millennial self-perfection, Miller's apocalypticism nevertheless had its roots in a kindred spirit of revivalism, perfectionism, millennialism, and voluntarism.

Just as American society moved from this era of openness to one of greater stability and discipline in the 1850s, so the emergent Seventh-day Adventist church acquired doctrinal definition and an institutional base enabling it to endure and expand. The earmarks of this change, Butler asserts, include theological articulation of a doctrine of the sanctuary, the Sabbath, the state of the dead, and the Spirit of Prophecy. Institutionally, the professionalization of the ministry, appearance of an official church paper, legal incorporation, and formation of health and educational institutions all testified to the group's commitment to permanence.

And the great Advent Movement has indeed proven permanent. The Seventh-day Adventist church is by far the largest institutional legacy of Millerism. We may be tempted to forget that we are not the only one. Clyde E. Hewitt's *Midnight and Morning* helps to balance the record of the post-Millerite years through an account of the birth of the Advent Christian denomination. The work, the first of an intended seven volumes that will tell the story of the Advent Christian denomination, was commissioned by their general conference. The book reflects the incipient state of that church's historiography. (By comparison the recent historical writings in the Seventh-day Adventist tradition seem mature.) This is not to suggest that *Midnight and Morning* is poor history; simply that it is history for the believer, unabashed in its expression of faith and unintending to attempt extensive contextual connections.

Since much of the book covers the same Millerite ground found elsewhere, there is no need to retrace it here. Though the Advent Christian church has never attained the size of our own and

did not create a true central organization until 1916, in many respects its post disappointment history resembles ours. Its organizers had first to decide whether they would remain outside other churches, and if so whether a new denomination should be attempted. The young organization had then to define its doctrine, which it did through a series of Bible conferences. It rejected the sanctuary teaching of Hiram Edson and of course never accepted the seventh-day Sabbath; but like its cousin Adventists it laid great stress on conditional immortality (a doctrine William Miller never accepted). Likewise, it established institutions of outreach and ordained ministers as the other new Adventist group was doing. Generous in its assessment of the Seventh-day Adventists, *Midnight and Morning* shows that apologetic history need not disparage other traditions.

Adventism in America exemplifies denominational history at a different stage of development. It marks the first time that Seventh-day Adventist historians have tailored a denominational history for the general public. A project long in the making, it was another brainchild of Vern Carner and Ronald Numbers in the early 1970s. Gary Land finally served as midwife to the volume. His exemplary efforts in unifying the essays (and in some cases updating the scholarship) of six authors have produced a book with far more coherence than is normally found in such joint endeavors. Seventh-day Adventists can refer their interested non-Adventist friends to this book with confidence.

Adventism in America does not replace Richard Schwarz's *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (1979) as the comprehensive account of our denomination's development. But Schwarz's commissioned work, though an outstanding example of a textbook, clearly was meant for an Adventist student audience. Its tone of affirmation is appropriate for its intended use, but less so for non-Adventist readers. Moreover, the careful screening it received before publication assured a subdued discussion of controversial issues in the church.

While *Adventism in America* could well be used in the classroom and maintains a supportive posture toward the church, it does so free of any

special pleading and of any institutional control of its content.

Adventism in America's seven essays by six authors (Gary Land penned two) represent a wealth of experience in Adventist scholarship. Godfrey T. Anderson, Everett N. Dick, and Emmett K. Vandevere are all retired from distinguished teaching careers that included groundbreaking work in denominational history. Keld J. Reynolds is likewise retired from a career in Adventist educational administration. Together with Richard Schwarz, the current dean of Ad-

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ventist history, and Gary Land, spokesman for a new generation of Adventist historians, these men bring seasoned judgment to our institution's past.

Gary Land forswears any "attempt to establish an overarching interpretation of the Adventist past" in the book. Nevertheless, certain themes present themselves to the reader. One is struck first by the tendency toward centralized ministerial control of the church from the earliest days of the denomination. It was a "system more episcopal than congregational, one operated largely by ministers rather than laypeople." One also sees anticipations of issues currently preoccupying the church. Financial strain, relocation of General Conference headquarters, merger of La Sierra and Loma Linda campuses, and other matters of church reorganization that stir debate have ancestries of various forms stretching back over much of our history.

One of the most valuable correctives of the volume is to the common perception of Ellen White as the dominant church figure from our earliest days. Rather, James White takes his place as the true father of the church, and his various successors—G. I. Butler, O. A. Olsen, A. G. Daniells included among others—are revealed as men with strong and not infrequently conflicting points of view. Indeed, most readers will be

impressed by the contentious debates that seemed endemic within leadership. The two most famous disputes, that surrounding the 1888 Minneapolis Bible Conference and the controversies swirling about John Harvey Kellogg, receive extended treatment. Both of these crippling struggles displayed the intertwined conflict of personalities and theology. And as recently happened in the wake of Desmond Ford's theological questioning, earlier disputes invariably cost the church the loyalty of former leaders.

No issue has remained more vexing in the 20th century than our understanding of Ellen White's prophetic gift. Gary Land gives a candid account of challenges to her inspiration by A. T. Jones and John Harvey Kellogg early in the century and of the church's response. Land persuasively argues that church leaders took questions about Ellen White's inspiration as another front in higher criticism's war on the Scriptures. Understood in this light the only recourse could be complete repudiation of such efforts and renewed commitment to a literalistic reading of her works. The church, in consequence, was burdened with an unhealthy and increasingly untenable view of inspiration that came under new scrutiny in the 1970s. Readers of *Spectrum* will be familiar with many of Land's references to events of the past two decades, but they will nowhere else find a better overview of the disputes.

From Critical History, Renewed Vision

I would give a false impression of *Adventism in America*, though, by discussing it only in terms of church problems. The volume's authors also detail an amazing

success story. The inevitable stresses of dogmatic battles, economic shortage, societal change, and an increasingly cosmopolitan church membership have demanded a creative and bold leadership. Church growth around the world, expansion of educational and health institutions, broadening notions of outreach to include famine relief and economic development—these all testify to an organization possessing an expansive vision. An appreciation of these strengths helps mitigate discouragement over less happy aspects of church polity.

Adventism in America deserves a wide readership, and though it was not intended primarily for an Adventist audience I am especially eager that it reach our members. A revitalized interest in our history can be a first step toward a renewed commitment to our tradition. Popular features such as the "Adventist Scrapbook" series in the *Adventist Review* encourage this. But the increasing sophistication of the Adventist constituency demands a history that is self-critical as well as respectful. Such history can be remedial, helping us avoid reinventing the square theological wheels of the past.

Adventist history as exemplified in these books also gives us a sense of where we have departed (for better or worse) from former attitudes or practices. After reading the several studies of our Millerite founders, for example, I was reminded of the chasm separating us from that generation of believers. We share a vocabulary of expectation but little of the experiential content. It is difficult for us to maintain the sense of imminence that drove the Millerites. Yet without some similar commitment to our task we betray the mission entrusted to us. History defines the nature of our dilemma, but it cannot determine the solution. That can be approached only by identifying the "present truth" for our time.