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THE MILLERITES AND THE BOSTON PRESS

IRA V. BROWN

NOT least among the incidents that gave the decade of the 1840's its bizarre character was the excitement arising from William Miller's startling prediction that the world would end in 1843. Miller, born in 1782 at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, grew to manhood in Washington County, New York, then a frontier area. After serving in the War of 1812, he settled down as a farmer at Low Hampton in that county, becoming a pillar of the Baptist Church. As a result of careful and prayerful study of the Bible he convinced himself that Christ would "again descend to this earth," which would perish by fire, and that then the righteous, whether dead or living, would be "caught up together to meet the Lord in the air" and reign with him forever in a regenerated world. This theory was already widely accepted among orthodox Christians, but Miller went so far as to declare, on the basis of the prophecies of Daniel, that these events would take place within the year following March 21, 1843.¹

His doctrine seemed to fit the religious spirit of the times, which emphasized evangelism and literal interpretation of Scripture. Shortly after he first presented his views in 1831 before a small congregation at Dresden, New York, Miller began to receive invitations from other churches. Deserting his farm and traveling from town to town in New York and New England, he was the instrument of many revivals among Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists. In 1839 he met Joshua V. Himes, pastor of the Chardon Street Chapel in

¹ William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, about the Year 1843* (Boston, 1841), contains a full exposition of his theory. The basic biography of Miller is Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller, Generally Known as a Lecturer on the Prophecies, and the Second Coming of Christ* (Boston, 1853). Clara E. Sears, *Days of Delusion; a Strange Bit of History* (Boston, 1924), is a popular account of Millerism.

Boston, who introduced him to that city. An agitator and reformer by nature, Himes turned his restless energy to the millenarian crusade, organizing and financing its publicity work. In 1840 he founded *Signs of the Times*, later known as the *Advent Herald*, published in Boston.² By means of a large tent carried from place to place, the Millerites conducted camp meetings in many communities. Unusual heavenly phenomena, especially a comet in 1843, strengthened the movement.

Millerism in Boston centered in a frame tabernacle, 115 by 87 feet in size, erected on Howard Street. Its construction was delayed by a dispute between the building committee and the contractor which attracted much notice in the press. One paper slyly remarked, "We trust these differences will speedily be settled and the building will soon be finished.—Brethren, the time is short!"³ According to contemporary estimates, the Tabernacle accommodated several thousand persons. Its dedication on May 4, 1843, said the *Boston Daily Bee* of the following day, was attended by a great throng.

Although Miller himself had not set a specific day for the Advent, his followers could not resist the temptation to do so, particularly when the prophet's health gave way and the movement got out of his control. Various leaders set different dates, of which March 21 and April 23 were the most popular. In Albany, it was reported, a group expected the end even before March 21.

Some forty or fifty persons, . . . fully impressed with the accuracy of the latest calculations, were up all night, with their "ascension robes" on, and their lamps trimmed and burning—ready, at a moment's warning, to be "taken up." It is needless to say that they were only "taken in."⁴

² Other Millerite papers were the *Midnight Cry* in New York and the *Alarm* in Philadelphia.

³ *Boston Daily Times*, March 29, 1843.

⁴ *Bay State Democrat* (Boston), March 17, 1843.

The agitation proved too great a strain for many persons, causing them to lose their reason. Dr. Samuel B. Woodward, superintendent of the Worcester Asylum, noted in his annual report for 1843 that of the twenty-three cases due to religious causes, Millerism was responsible for fifteen. "It is rare," he was quoted as saying, "that a popular religious error has produced so much excitement in the community, and rendered so many insane."⁵

Despite the failure of the Advent to materialize in 1843, the craze continued to spread. Though the vernal equinox of 1844 was the latest date to which Miller's calculations extended, some of his followers decided the end was to come on the "tenth day of the seventh month" of the current Jewish year, October 22, 1844. The Boston Millerites, thinking this meant October 10, planned for the ascension at that time. The leaders fixed four o'clock as the hour for the Advent, and early in the day the Tabernacle was packed, but just before the arrival of the appointed time, they announced that it would not occur until the twenty-second.⁶ A great crowd had gathered outside "to see 'em go up."⁷ "Although we gazed long and anxiously at the roof," said a reporter, "we saw no indication of its rising and concluded that the country was perfectly safe for a little while longer."⁸ It seems that people came in from neighboring areas to sleep in the Tabernacle during succeeding nights. One paper referred to "all-night meetings" there, "immense crowds" which attended, and "wild and fanatical proceedings."⁹ Sometimes "swarms of naughty boys and mischievous loafers" on the outside kept up a "running accompaniment," shouting and performing on diverse "musical and unmusical" instruments.¹⁰

⁵ *Boston Investigator*, April 17, 1844.

⁶ *Boston Post*, October 11, 1844.

⁷ *Bay State Democrat*, October 10, 1844.

⁸ *Daily Times*, October 11, 1844.

⁹ *Bunker Hill Aurora and Boston Mirror*, October 12, 1844.

¹⁰ *Saturday Evening Gazette* (Boston), October 12, 1844.

On Saturday evening, October 12, so great a crowd collected in the building and such an unruly mob on the street that city officials brought about adjournment of the meeting, thus preventing a potential riot. When several window panes were broken during the night, people sleeping in the Tabernacle at the time were said to have thought the end had come. Some editors protested against the mob spirit and such "outrages," suggesting that the police take special care of Howard Street, but others placed primary blame on the Adventists themselves as public nuisances.¹¹ Similar difficulties were experienced in Philadelphia and New York.

The excitement now reached its climax. Those who looked for Christ's appearance on October 22 suspended their secular affairs entirely and devoted themselves to preparations for the end. Shops closed and crops went unharvested. The selectmen of Meredith, New Hampshire, like those of other towns, warned persons who were neglecting their earthly duties to go to work on penalty of being "taken care of as idlers and spendthrifts are."¹² At last the great day came—and went, again disappointing Millerite expectations. Nevertheless, the Tabernacle on the twenty-fourth was crowded "by as dense a mass of human beings as were ever packed within its walls."¹³ Since no specific new date was set, thousands now abandoned the movement. Many, however, remained, and in 1845 they established a loose organization, out of which grew the Seventh Day Adventist denomination and other smaller sects.¹⁴

But if Boston was a center of religious heat, it was also a center of cultural light. In the 1840's it supported no fewer than ten daily newspapers as well as a great variety of weekly

¹¹ Boston *Daily Mail* and *Daily Times*, October 14, 1844.

¹² *Massachusetts Ploughman*, November 16, 1844.

¹³ Boston *Courier*, October 25, 1844.

¹⁴ William W. Sweet, *The Story of Religions in America* (New York, 1930), 404.

journals. By and large, they all manifested a general antipathy for Miller's theory and its adherents.

Papers which were chiefly concerned with politics, however, seemed loath to express editorial opinions on Adventist activities, perhaps because Millerism was competing against the election excitement of late October, 1844, the time of the spirited Clay-Polk campaign on the expansionist issue. The attention which the *Advertiser*, the *Courier*, and the *Atlas*, old-line Whig organs, gave the movement was largely confined to a few stories of fanaticism clipped from other papers, chiefly those of New York and Philadelphia. The *Mercantile Journal*, a fourth Whig paper, which carried a greater range of news, was more concerned about the Millerites. It hoped that those who had been "deluded by these doctrines" and had "neglected their duties to themselves and their families" would "collect together their scattered reasoning faculties, and resume their wonted occupations . . . as rational men and as good and consistent Christians."¹⁵

The *Bay State Democrat* and the *Post*, another Democratic organ, ran gossipy columns called respectively "Splinters" and "All Sorts of Paragraphs," in which they occasionally railed at Millerism. The former, for example, remarked that October 22 in Boston was a "delightfully mild day," distinguished by no untoward happenings. "To be really serious," it continued, "when will men and women learn wisdom, and serve their God by serving their fellow-men, and not attempt to pry into those things that are not revealed, and of which no man knows, not even the angels of heaven?"¹⁶

The *Times*, also a supporter of the Democrats, is more notable as Boston's first successful penny paper. Appealing to those who desired sensational news, it exceeded in circulation all the city's nine other dailies. It vigorously indicted "the Miller delusion," declaring that the great mass of Mil-

¹⁵ October 16, 1844.

¹⁶ October 22, 1844.

lerites were sincere and honest people who had been misled by the "mad and declamatory harangues" of "a few designing hypocrites." These "artful and corrupt priests" deserved "no worse fate than to be sent to the House of Correction as . . . swindlers." If their dishonesty could not be proved, they should be lodged in strait jackets in the insane hospital at South Boston. "We speak warmly on this topic, for we have seen some most melancholy cases of suffering brought about by the ministration of these 'wolves in sheep's clothing.'" ¹⁷

The *Transcript*, first of the new-style, nonpartisan papers established in Boston and selling at only \$4 a year, was edited at this time by a "conservative" and "intensely religious" woman,¹⁸ Cornelia W. Walter, who strongly opposed the Millerites. Noting the failure of their prophecy, she remarked that if they had "a particle of common sense," they would not be fooled a third time. Let them "quit Millerism and betake themselves to churches where truth is taught." ¹⁹

Especially bitter was the *Bee*, a nonpartisan penny paper only about half the size of the political and commercial papers. Placing primary emphasis not on national politics but on crime and other melodramatic news, sheets of this type were for that period what the tabloid is today.²⁰ Like the *Times*, the *Bee* suggested "a suitable term of residence within the walls of an insane asylum" as the only cure for Millerites. Although "men of sense" might laugh at their "vagaries," there was little chance that this folly would die quickly, even with repeated failures of the prophecy, for the leaders would "keep the ball moving" as long as they could get followers "credulous enough to put faith in them." ²¹ "Hundreds, if not thousands," who had given up their worldly

¹⁷ October 16, 1844.

¹⁸ Joseph E. Chamberlin, *The Boston Transcript, a History of its First Hundred Years* (Boston, 1930), 73.

¹⁹ October 24, 1844.

²⁰ Frank L. Mott, *American Journalism, a History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 Years, 1690 to 1940* (New York, 1941), 215 ff.

²¹ October 10, 1844.

possessions would find themselves "at the commencement of a hard winter deprived of the necessaries of life, and but ill-prepared in mind to commence anew the struggle for subsistence." "Should we wonder," exclaimed the *Bee*, "that misery, starvation, and suicide follow!"²²

On the other hand, Miller's followers found in the *Mail*, another penny sheet, perhaps their best friend among Boston's dailies. This paper generally used the term "Second Adventists" rather than "Millerites," which had assumed the character of a scornful epithet. Although its editor had no confidence in their doctrine, he had

always endeavored to treat the proselytes to that faith with kindness, and with becoming respect. Weak as we conceive their doctrine to be, and injurious as it must be, if untrue, to the cause of religion and of public morals, yet we cannot find it in our heart to condemn those whom we believe to be actuated by honest motives and virtuous impulses.

Personally acquainted with "a number of Second Advent believers," he could not "forego the impression" that they were "men and women of pure hearts and fervent piety."²³

The semi-weekly *American Traveller* exhibited the usual public reaction to Millerism. The evils resulting from "a belief in the preposterous opinions of William Miller" were "beyond calculation." "Surely those who have thus deluded these honest people will have a fearful account to settle for their presumption."²⁴ The Millerites were also often the object of the satire of the *Saturday Evening Gazette*, a vehicle for lighter news and popular literature. Commenting on the failure of the predictions in the spring of 1843, it announced that the end of the world was "stretched out a little," or else Miller "can't find it, because as the sailor said of a tangled rope, some rascal has cut the end off." It went on to state that

²² October 17, 1844.

²³ October 12, 1844.

it had not for a moment supposed that "this Miller or any other miller would stop his mill while so much grist was crowding into it."²⁵ William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* demanded that, having "dogmatized so authoritatively and offensively" respecting the "certain and inevitable end of all things," the leaders in "this stupendous imposture" should offer "the clearest proofs of contrition" and confess they had been led, "not by the Spirit of Truth, but by a deplorable fantasy of the brain, now plainly demonstrated to be such."²⁶ Garrison had a special reason for disliking the movement since it had attracted crusaders, including Joshua V. Himes himself, away from the abolitionist banner.

Religious opinion was just as hostile to Millerism as secular, or even more so. The Congregational *Recorder* said it was "a most specious and likely to be a most hurtful delusion." "This new assailant of the peace and order of the churches" contained the seeds of a harvest of trouble for Christianity.²⁷ Another Congregational weekly, the *New England Puritan*, displaying a typically puritanical attitude, compared "the Millerite in his camp-meeting" to "the frequenter of the theatre, swelling and sobbing under the tragic illusions of the stage." Both were partaking of "the same kind of mental intoxication," each experienced "really a luxury in this preternatural excitement," had "a passion for it," and sought it repeatedly "as the drunkard does his cups."²⁸ Who would be answerable for the effects upon those who outlived the limits of the predicted cataclysm, "for the infidelity—the scoffs at religion—the ridicule of the Bible . . . and the long catalogue of evils which all experience proves to be the inevitable consequences of such excitement?"²⁹

²⁴ November 1, 1844.

²⁵ May 20, 1843.

²⁶ November 8, 1844.

²⁷ February 23, 1843.

²⁸ October 18, 1844.

²⁹ March 31, 1843.

The Baptist paper in Boston, the *Christian Watchman*, opposed Millerism with increasing vehemence as the movement progressed. It granted that the prophet, "when first introduced to the public" was "doubtless an honest and humble-minded man," whose views on the Advent were "mainly correct, except as to time." The delivery of his lectures was "not unfrequently attended with a religious awakening." But the doctrine had come to represent the "wildest fanaticism" and had produced disastrous results as it spread, breaking up many churches and disturbing the tranquillity of many more.³⁰ The Baptist organ was especially hostile to the Adventist leaders, who had drawn so many members from Baptist congregations. Just how much the faith had been utilized by "designing knaves for sinister purposes" was impossible to say, but that it had been so used to "a considerable extent," there could be no doubt. In a thinly veiled attack on Himes, the editor continued, "We can hardly conceive of a character more entirely depraved, more completely lost to every obligation of justice and honesty, to say nothing of religion, than the man who would receive the spoils of his fellow-men by bringing them under the influence of a delusion so destructive and pernicious."³¹

One of the most restrained treatments of the millennialist group was that of the Unitarian newspaper, the *Christian Register*. Its editor had "but rarely spoken of Millerism," being "assured that it must soon sink into forgetfulness, to the disappointment and confusion of those who trust in its predictions." He felt, however, that the teaching would yield "substantial moral benefit to very, very few."³² On the contrary, the credulity and fanaticism excited by this movement would tend to discredit all religion in the eyes of many.³³ The *Trumpet and Universalist Advertiser*, spokesman for

³⁰ February 3, 1843.

³¹ November 1, 1844.

³² February 10, 1844.

³³ November 16, 1844.

another of the liberal denominations, not only attacked Miller himself as a false prophet but also assailed those Baptist, Methodist, and Congregational ministers who had allowed him to present his views in the beginning. In particular, it flayed those “who do not believe Miller’s nonsense themselves but who are willing to make use of him as a tool to get up a revival.”³⁴ If the evangelists had not succored the mania in its infancy, it might have been strangled then. “By their means, it was kept alive, and now let them look at the consequences.”³⁵ This paper ran numerous articles refuting the eschatological theory and asserted that Universalists had “done more to arrest the effects of Millerism than any other class of Christians, yes, we may say, all other classes combined.”³⁶

The Catholic *Pilot* took advantage of the unpopularity of the Millerites to denounce Protestantism in general. “It is impossible to imagine such madness as now rages through New England, righteous and right Protestant New England,” said the *Pilot*. “This is all the result of the Reformation—it is another sprig from the viscious [*sic*] root of Private Judgment in matters of Eternal Concern. What right has a man who asserts that each one of us should determine for ourselves as to belief, to censure and anathematize the wretched believer in the Second Coming?”³⁷

Strangely, the Adventists found one of the best friends in an “infidel” sheet called the *Investigator*. Although it had “not the smallest relish” for the theory, which “in the light of common sense and the nature of things” was “altogether absurd,” it considered Millerism “quite as sensible Christianity” as any “in this age of quackery.”³⁸ True, it was “a humbug,” but little if anything in Christianity was not. Since

³⁴ December 7, 1839.

³⁵ November 2, 1844.

³⁶ October 26, 1844.

³⁷ October 26, 1844.

³⁸ March 1, 1843.

“these deluded people” had been so abused by their fellow-Christians, the skeptic journal was induced “to speak a word or two in their favor.” “In doing this,” said the editor; “we have acted on the same principle that impels a philanthropist to side with a little monomaniac, when an army of big ones are tearing him to pieces.”³⁹

From this survey of editorial opinion it is evident that the majority of Boston’s newspapers severely criticized the Millerites. Not a single editor gave any credence to the prophecy itself, and only occasionally did a few papers, notably the *Mail* and the *Investigator*, urge tolerance toward the group. On the contrary, the manifold methods which the press used to oppose the sect and the charges they made against it amounted almost to weapons in a concerted anti-Millerite campaign.

They endeavored, in the first place, to prove Miller’s doctrine false, using Scripture itself against the theory. A favorite quotation was Christ’s admonition, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.” The *Saturday Evening Gazette*, referring to this text, averred that Miller and his converts had “made themselves wiser than Christ or Angels.”⁴⁰ Scientific arguments were also marshalled to refute the dogma. The *Times* stated that it was utterly contradicted by geology, astronomy, and chemistry, for these sciences made it clear that a “general conflagration” of the world as a result of volcanic eruption, collision with a comet, or spontaneous combustion was impossible.⁴¹ Others pointed out that it was “but the revamping of an old humbug.”⁴² New Englanders were especially “apt to indulge in the anticipation . . . of this never to be enacted tragedy.” From earlier experiences one could judge “how much confidence should be placed in the reasonings of such

³⁹ May 10, 1843.

⁴⁰ March 18, 1843.

⁴¹ October 17, 1844.

⁴² *Boston Daily Bee*, March 15, 1843.

men as Miller, sustained as they principally are, by the foolish apprehensions of those whom neither scripture nor philosophy can enlighten or subdue.”⁴³

Even an orthodox Congregational paper went so far as to deny literalist Advent doctrines altogether. Said the *Puritan*, under the title of “Spiritual Millennium,” the “erroneous” belief in a personal and bodily return of the Savior had paved the way for Millerism. The “Providence of God” had effectually disproved “the groundless expectations of the Second Advent believers” and would equally disappoint anticipations of a visible and personal reign of Christ on earth.⁴⁴ Several editors quoted William Ellery Channing’s words to the effect that Christ, according to the true interpretation of the New Testament, is said to come “whenever his religion breaks out in new glory, or gains new triumphs.”⁴⁵ Speaking less delicately, the *Investigator* called Adventism, immediate or ultimate, “all a fable and a farce, sustained by a few historic facts interwoven with fantasy, traditions, and the visions of monomaniac superstitionists.” The same paper opined that, though it was impossible to elevate the whole world “up to the intellectual religion,” a few might enjoy the privilege.⁴⁶

More important than argument was the instrument of derision. “We have written in a strain of ridicule of the whole affair,” said the *Bee*, “and really we cannot bring ourselves to view it in any other light.” Since it was of no use to reason with “the weak-minded and ignorant, much less with the crafty and knavish,” this was the only effective weapon.⁴⁷ Dozens of items in this vein appeared in the newspapers. Some were only a sentence or two in length, but such barbs were as powerful as longer pieces. The *Bay State Democrat* often directed its “Splinters” at the Millerites. It suggested,

⁴³ *Bay State Democrat*, March 24, 1843.

⁴⁴ October 25, 1844.

⁴⁵ *Boston Transcript*, November 1, 1844.

⁴⁶ October 30, 1844.

⁴⁷ October 12, 1844.

for example, that “married folks with small families must make the best Millerites, as they are most seriously disturbed by the ‘Midnight Cry!’”⁴⁸ Again, commenting on the Adventist exhortation to “let the alarm go out—Wake up the virgins,” the *Bee* asked, “Oh, hard-hearted Millerites—would you have our wives and widows left sleeping?”⁴⁹ Another paper could not help “relishing the sly vein of burlesque” which pervaded the reply of a man who was asked by an Adventist, “What is your idea of the end of the world?” “My idea,” he said, “is that the world is round, and consequently has no end!”⁵⁰

Many anecdotes were tied up with the political interests of the period. One told of a native of Indiana who was engaged in a heated argument in regard to the campaign of 1844. A Millerite, overhearing the debate, interposed, “None of you will see either Clay or Polk elected; Christ will be our next President, and will rule over us all.” The Hoosier tartly replied, “I’ll just go you a V he don’t get Indiana no how!”⁵¹ Shortly before the election, it was rumored that a distinguished Adventist had put off the end of the world until after the elevation of James K. Polk to the presidency. This, remarked the Whig *Mercantile Journal*, meant that it had been “indefinitely postponed.”⁵²

Among the methods used to place the millenarians in a foolish light was the persistent charge that they prepared “ascension robes.” According to one Boston paper, “the ladies” said that Daniels, 12 Tremont Row, had “an excellent assortment of fashionable articles for ascension robes.” In order to be prepared against disappointment, they had determined to have theirs made of “the richest silks and satins, and in the most fashionable style,” so that if the end did not

⁴⁸ March 7, 1843.

⁴⁹ March 17, 1843.

⁵⁰ *Transcript*, October 24, 1844.

⁵¹ *Daily Mail*, November 9, 1844.

⁵² October 28, 1844.

come at the appointed time, the garments would still be serviceable for ordinary use.⁵³ Lydia Maria Child, New York correspondent of the *Courier*, reported that a shop in the Bowery mounted a placard on which was inscribed in large letters, "Muslin for Ascension Robes." "I know not," she commented, "whether this was done for waggery, or from that spirit of trade which is ever willing to turn a penny on war, pestilence, or conflagration."⁵⁴ The tradition that large numbers of Millerites made and wore ascension robes, which always comes to mind when the sect is mentioned, may possibly be a fabrication.⁵⁵ Miller's friend and biographer, Sylvester Bliss, admitted that there were "some cases of extravagance, as there have been in all great movements," but held that the published accounts of these were highly colored and often without foundation. "All reports respecting the preparation of ascension robes, &c., and which are still by many believed," he asserted, "were demonstrated over and over again to be false and scandalous."⁵⁶ Himes declared that the only garments he had exhorted his followers to put on were "the robes of righteousness, obtained by faith in Jesus Christ."⁵⁷ At least one Boston paper, the *Investigator*, said it was "inclined to doubt" such stories.⁵⁸

The press attack also involved several grave charges against Millerism. The most frequent one was that it was responsible for dozens of cases of insanity and suicide. American journalism of the 1840's was just as sensational as that of today, with

⁵³ *Bay State Democrat*, March 27, 1843.

⁵⁴ November 2, 1844.

⁵⁵ Everett N. Dick, author of the articles on Miller and Himes in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, states (XII, 642) that "according to the best evidence," these tales are "not based on facts," though tradition to this day readily affirms them. On the basis of numerous family anecdotes, which form the authority for much of her book, Miss Sears insists that the wearing of white robes was a general practice among Millerites. See *Days of Delusion*, chapters IX-XI and pages 256-260.

⁵⁶ Bliss, *William Miller*, 276.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Sears, *Days of Delusion*, 258.

⁵⁸ March 15, 1843.

the added drawback that the papers of a century ago took less trouble to verify their information. The following headlines or similar ones appeared in nearly every issue: "Dreadful Calamity," "Melancholy Occurrence," "Outrageous," "Frantic Affair." Not content with simply stating the real or alleged facts, the reporters generally commented on them, for the distinction between news and views did not mean a great deal in the journalism of this period.

One story told of a Mrs. Luther (no first name was given) of Somerset, Massachusetts, a Millerite who was taken to the insane hospital at Worcester, where she died "in the most awful paroxysms." The article concluded with this bit of moralizing: "She has left a worthy husband and nine children to deplore her melancholy fate."⁵⁹ A Mrs. Chase of Cleveland, Ohio, "once a very worthy, amiable, and intelligent person, a fond mother and an affectionate wife," was exhibited as another horrible example: "The errors of that one idea, the end of the world, took possession of her mind, and reason forsook its throne, perhaps forever." Dressing up her five children, she told them that Christ would soon take them to the skies and then suddenly tried to murder them, but they fled "her fiendish grasp." This story, too, ended sententiously: "The misery and suffering of this once happy family, can only be appreciated by those who are compelled day and night to witness it."⁶⁰

Young persons also often succumbed, if one may believe the papers. Drawn to madness, "a young and beautiful girl, apparently about 17 or 18 years of age," had attempted suicide, "no doubt with the intention of freeing herself from this earthly sorrow."⁶¹ A youth who was "good . . . honest, and industrious" had similarly become a maniac. "His poor mother, who saw his condition with a bleeding and almost

⁵⁹ *Daily Bee*, March 16, 1843.

⁶⁰ *Transcript*, May 13, 1843.

⁶¹ *Daily Bee*, March 20, 1843.

broken heart, endeavored in vain to sooth, calm, and restore him.”⁶² In the fall of 1844 the case of Abigail Shepard of Boston was widely publicized. According to the story as commonly related, Mrs. Shepard was “a young married woman” whose alienation of mind resulted from attending Adventist meetings. After attempting to leap from a chamber window, she was committed to the Worcester asylum.⁶³ One paper, however, reported that this information was “in some respects incorrect,” for Mrs. Shepard, far from being “a young married woman,” could claim fifty-three years and five grandchildren.⁶⁴

Suicides gave the reporters ample scope for sensational embroidery. George Florida, a Springfield blacksmith, “hung himself with an iron chain . . . with a bible by his side and a dagger in his pocket,” after being in “a deranged state of mind for some time, caused by imbibing the doctrines of Millerism.”⁶⁵ A merchant of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, was impatiently waiting for the Advent on March 21, 1843, when he climbed to the top of a tall tree with “a garb for the occasion.” There, the story continued, “mantled in his long white ascension robe,” he made “one aspiring effort” to defy the law of gravity, plummeted to the ground, and “instantly died from a broken neck.”⁶⁶ While many of the accounts may have been wholly or partially false and some insanities unjustly ascribed to Adventist influence, it seems beyond question that the movement ruined a godly number of minds.

Another serious accusation against Millerism was, in the words of the *Watchman*, that it dissolved “the dearest of all ties, the marriage union.”⁶⁷ An irate husband once broke in

⁶² *Advertiser*, May 9, 1843.

⁶³ *Courier*, October 23, 1844.

⁶⁴ *Bay State Democrat*, October 23, 1844.

⁶⁵ *Atlas*, March 16, 1843.

⁶⁶ *Liberator*, March 24, 1843.

⁶⁷ November 1, 1844.

upon a meeting, where “females principally attended, headed by a few brothers of the society,” and denounced the latter as “a vile set of impostors and scoundrels, who get a parcel of females around you that you may fatten on what they bring to you, to the neglect of their children and their homes.”⁶⁸ Commenting on the large number of women present at the Boston Tabernacle, a reporter noted that they had neglected “their dinners and suppers, darning their stockings, and taking care of their babies at home.”⁶⁹

Still worse was the fact that infatuated husbands were giving up work and inflicting poverty upon their families. Typical was the story of a woman who offered some spoons for sale to a silversmith. Since he could not afford to pay their real value, he advised her not to sell them; but she persisted, saying that her children would starve otherwise and that, in any event, she would not need money after October 22. When the reluctant buyer asked for an explanation, the woman replied that her Millerite husband had left home for the purpose of preaching to the benighted in the country.⁷⁰ Similarly, in Baltimore Millerism attracted notoriety by tending to lead husbands and fathers to neglect the support of their families. Isaac Gates, an Adventist preacher, was arrested on the charge that several of his followers had quit work and surrendered their property without providing for their dependents.⁷¹

The papers reported many instances of shopkeepers who closed up in anticipation of the end. A Newburyport dry-goods merchant was said to have posted this notice on his door on October 12:

Believing as I most sincerely do, that the Lord Jesus Christ will, in a few days, come in the clouds of Heaven, I retire from this

⁶⁸ *Massachusetts Ploughman*, November 9, 1844.

⁶⁹ *Daily Times*, October 11, 1844.

⁷⁰ *Atlas*, October 19, 1844.

⁷¹ *Advertiser*, October 18, 1844.

shop; as I am determined, God being my helper, that my work shall correspond with my faith.⁷²

The owner of a New York shoe store opened his stock to the public "free gratis and for nothing," and the shoes were walking off at a great rate when "a son of the misguided man procured the services of a constable, and had the door closed."⁷³ Such examples could be multiplied. Some doubtless were true, but others were overdrawn or wholly invented. Occasionally the papers themselves admitted this. In the case of a "Mr. Gaylord, of Pennsylvania, of whom the newspapers spoke the other day as giving out his dry goods gratuitously, in the expectation of old Miller's Advent," the *Atlas* reported his complete denial. True, he was a Millerite, but he had not owned a dry-goods store for two years.⁷⁴

The abandonment of worldly concerns led a Philadelphia congregation into a kind of communistic arrangement, the surpluses of the rich being placed in a general fund for the benefit of poorer members. Thus, at the close of a sermon, a man announced that in adjusting his accounts, making allowances for his necessities up to the final day, he had \$160 excess, which was at the society's disposal. A poor brother stated his need for \$60 to set him straight with the world. This sum was promptly given and the remainder placed in the common treasury.⁷⁵

Several stories dealt with financial reparation on the part of repentant Millerites preparing to meet the Lord. According to one, a New York insurance company received an anonymous letter containing \$120 with the following explanation: "The Lord is at hand. This was unlawfully taken from you, and I ask forgiveness, for God has forgiven me very

⁷² *Courier*, October 17, 1844.

⁷³ *Traveller*, October 22, 1844.

⁷⁴ March 16, 1843.

⁷⁵ *Traveller*, October 25, 1844.

much.”⁷⁶ The *Transcript* remarked that, if Millerism should generally lead defaulters to pay their debts, it would achieve “some good in return for the vast amount of misery” it had caused. Such a consummation was “devoutly to be hoped, though hardly to be anticipated.”⁷⁷

The press campaign against Millerism culminated in the accusation that the movement was a fraud operated for the financial benefit of the leaders. Though Miller himself was seldom so attacked, Himes was the object of very bitter libel on this ground. The *Trumpet*, noting early in 1843 that Himes had purchased a large safe, charged that he did not really believe in the speedy end of the world but was “playing a deep game upon the credulity of the community, to make himself rich.”⁷⁸ The *Bee* called for an investigation of his accounts, since it was time to expose “this man’s falsifications and impositions.” If he had not obtained money under false pretenses, it had “never heard of a swindler that did.”⁷⁹

The *Post* brought the matter to a head on October 26, 1844, by publishing some explicit “facts illustrating the selfishness of the leaders of the second adventists.” The wife of an aged colored man, it alleged, had contributed \$2,000 to the cause, leaving her family poor. A grocer on Pleasant Street had similarly disposed of \$500, and a carpenter on Tremont Road had given a like amount, “all he had.” Himes was accused of selling considerable quantities of old jewelry and silverware to Boston shops. Furthermore, it was charged, he had induced boarding-house keepers to take in Adventists free and thus embarrassed them financially. The conclusion was that those who had produced the excitement were “unprincipled men, perfectly conscious of the absurdity of the opinions they inculcate, and entirely reckless of the injury

⁷⁶ *Daily Bee*, October 11, 1844.

⁷⁷ October 24, 1844.

⁷⁸ February 25, 1843.

⁷⁹ October 19, 1844.

they inflict, if they can only turn the evil to their pecuniary benefit."

Against these and countless other reflections upon his integrity, Himes prepared an elaborate defense, published in the *Post* November 2, 1844. If he had "wronged or defrauded any man," he would "restore him fourfold." He invited all responsible men to certify the *facts* of any such cases over their own signatures. His accounts were open to inspection by all "proper or interested persons." Most of the reports of insanity, suicide, broken homes, and impoverishment were "unfounded" or "greatly distorted and exaggerated," he believed, and the few authentic instances of fanaticism were caused by "influences over which we had no control." When people felt obliged to resign their jobs, he had "exhorted them to fulfil every obligation to their fellowmen, as well as to their God." The poor would be cared for by their Adventist brethren.

Then followed a refutation of the specific charges which had appeared the week before, with statements from each of the individuals supposedly concerned. The colored man said he and his wife had given three dollars towards building the Tabernacle and subsequently only "a little in the penny collections." He knew of no one else to whom the story could apply. The grocer had given no more to the Advent cause than he had always given for religious purposes and had "never been solicited by them for money or anything else." The carpenter had contributed "not twenty dollars a year for the last five years." A jewelry store had accepted less than two hundred dollars' worth from the Millerites. The boarding-house keeper had never "thought it necessary to inquire of the public" whether she had the right to take in boarders gratis and had "in this matter acted independently of anyone." In an additional statement dealing with an insanity case, a woman affirmed that her husband's illness could not be "justly attributed to the doctrine of the Advent."

Himes's exoneration, or condensations of it, appeared in several other Boston papers during the next week or two and won favorable comment. "It is but justice to say," the *Mail* held, "that he most effectually disarms his enemies, and nails their slander to the counter." It had always considered him "an honest and upright, though a deluded man." While his work had "done great mischief," this was no excuse for "getting up such unblushing frauds and falsehoods."⁸⁰ The editor of the *Journal* admitted that, from personal acquaintance and business transactions with the Adventist organizer, he had "never seen anything in his demeanor or conduct, which would lead us to question his honor or integrity."⁸¹ The *Liberator* thought he had proved "in the most satisfactory manner" that the specific reports were "gross calumnies."⁸² Himes noted in the next issue of the *Advent Herald* that "the tone of the public press" towards him had essentially changed within a few weeks and thanked the editors who had contradicted "the foul slanders" against his character for "this act of justice."⁸³ Several papers, however, remained adamant. Since the *Watchman* had published none of the rumors mentioned in the defense, it "felt under no obligation to copy it."⁸⁴ The *Times* had "nothing to say . . . about particular cases of wrongdoing" but was concerned about "the legitimate effects of this kind of fanatical preaching" and believed "the leaders in this unholy crusade should be held accountable for the waste of property, industry, and reason brought about by this delusion."⁸⁵

The truth appears to be that Himes, a rather enigmatical figure, was personally honest and the charge of graft unjustified. Doubtless he made a good living out of his preaching and

⁸⁰ November 4, 1844.

⁸¹ November 5, 1844.

⁸² November 8, 1844.

⁸³ November 13, 1844.

⁸⁴ November 8, 1844.

⁸⁵ November 5, 1844.

publishing, but hardly a fortune. As for his sincerity, the evidence indicates that he did not believe in the exact time set by Miller, but he continued a leader in the Adventist cause until 1878, when, after differences with his brethren, he joined the Episcopal Church.⁸⁶

The story of the Millerite excitement and its treatment by the Boston press is as much a commentary on the characteristics of American journalism as it is on intellectual and religious currents in the 1840's. On the one hand, the papers performed a useful public service in decrying Miller's prophecy and playing up its evil philosophical, psychiatric, and social effects. Universally regarding it as a "delusion," none of the papers examined did anything to frighten readers into believing that the world would actually end in 1843 or 1844. But the methods which they used to combat Millerism—the allegations of fanaticism or dishonesty—displayed astonishingly low reporting and editorial standards. It is well-nigh impossible to distinguish between news items and editorials in most journals of this period. It is also difficult in many cases to determine whether a statement represented the editor's view and the paper's policy, the opinion of a reporter or correspondent, or the view of some other sheet from which the piece was copied. The *Post* compared contemporary editors to "sailing craft—they are clippers!"⁸⁷ Seldom did one paper bother to rewrite articles taken from another, and often they were printed without acknowledgment. So many of the stories in Boston papers were borrowed from those of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other smaller places that a study of the treatment of Millerism in the press of this one city gives a good indication of attitudes in other localities.

The most difficult problem of all is that of separating fact from rumor. There was some justification for the Adventist complaint that "one of the most striking features of the times

⁸⁶ *Dictionary of American Biography*, ix, 61.

⁸⁷ April 19, 1844.

is the readiness with which the press will believe and publish anything which happens to be put in circulation.”⁸⁸ A correspondent of the *Watchman*, discussing a study of American newspapers which had appeared in the English *Foreign Quarterly Review*,⁸⁹ spoke of their “lamentably low” literary and moral character. An editor’s aim was all too often to make not an excellent but a popular paper. Sheets “well diversified with vulgarism, and now and then interlarded with the horrible and the awful, with a joke to close” would find numerous subscribers. Their “character for truth” had become “so bad that any uncommon event needs confirmation before we are ready to believe it.”⁹⁰ Unquestionably many of the reports regarding Millerites were highly inaccurate.

This is not to defend Millerism, a type of religious teaching which is hardly to be recommended and which obviously had unfortunate consequences. Rather it is to indicate that the “congenital credulity” which a modern writer has called “characteristic of the age”⁹¹ applied not only to the followers of Miller and other eccentrics of the 1840’s, but to the newspapers and reading public as well. The press might also have taken to heart the pious hope expressed by one paper that “the excited imaginations of our supernatural-loving people” might have a little rest, and that (after the forthcoming election!) all would be “quite rational, wise and dignified—discarding all humbug, and governed by truth and reason alone.”⁹²

⁸⁸ *Advent Herald*, December 4, 1844.

⁸⁹ Volume XXX (October, 1842), 197–222.

⁹⁰ June 7, 1844.

⁹¹ Meade Minnigerode, *The Fabulous Forties* (New York, 1924), 3–4.

⁹² *Boston Daily Times*, November 5, 1844.