When the other Millerite ministers and lecturers are added to the equation, it is easy to see how dramatically the movement impacted America.

William Miller and His Time

The period from the conclusion of the Revolutionary War to the Civil War was a time of great optimism in the newly formed United States. Settlers were pressing north and west, taming the wilderness. A fierce attitude of independence and self-determination was revealed in the personal autonomy and yeoman democracy of Jeffersonian Republicanism. The inauguration of Andrew Jackson in 1829 as president formalized the "toppling of the old order by excluding from office the wellborn and well-educated who had long been accustomed to holding the reins of power."[8] Jackson represented liberty and the absolute right of the person to make self-directed decisions. This personal independence extended beyond politics to the realm of religious faith and practice. The new cultural milieu stood against the established political order of the Federalists and the established religious order of the Congregationalists. American Methodism, the Baptists, and the Christian Connection became the new popular churches in northern New England and in the frontier west. Each gave individual experience a place of prominence. Rapid economic development, population growth, and less settled conditions led to rampant religious experimentation and diversity of thought.

William Miller's preaching years occurred at the peak of social and religious optimism in the 1830s and 1840s. Utopian millennialism was fostered by Charles Finney and other preachers of the Second Great Awakening who believed that a millennium of peace was imminent. Numerous religious groups, particularly in upstate New York, took this optimism and individualism to its extreme and established specialized communities. Joseph Smith and the Mormon faith sought to restore the kingdom of God on earth, while John Noyes proclaimed free love perfectionism. Throughout New England and in the West, Shakers professed that Christ had come spiritually in the person of Ann Lee to establish a new social order. Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism attempted through communal societies to perfect human institutions. Universalism, an older movement, complemented or interacted with various millennial and utopian groups.

While certainly a person of his time, William Miller and the movement he originated brought the distinct, though not original, idea that the Second Coming of Jesus would precede the millennium and herald the end of the world. Miller's message cut across the dominant millennial ideas

of his time. It proclaimed with great urgency that the end of the world would come about the year 1843. His Bible-based message called for a hope for the future that looked beyond human accomplishment and to a New Earth to be established by God after the Second Coming. Miller's approach was reasoned rather than emotional and influenced a broad cross-section of society from "infidel" deists and universalists to mainline and restorationist Protestantism. A key to his success was his collaboration with many dozens of ministers from various denominations.

Recent scholarship places Miller and those associated with him within the context of antebellum America. Millerites are no longer viewed as fanatics but rather as a part of a dynamic and remarkable period in American history. For Seventh-day Adventists and other religious groups who emerged from the Millerite movement following the 1844 disappointment, Miller is respected as a man of God who brought attention to neglected and important biblical truths and launched a movement that they see as a fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

Sketch of William Miller's Life

William Miller was born on February 15, 1782, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, the first of sixteen children. His father, Captain William Miller, was an officer in the Revolutionary War. His mother Paulina was the daughter of Elnathan Phelps, a minister of the Baptist church.[9] In 1786 the family moved to Low Hampton, New York, close to the border of Vermont and the towns of Fairhaven and Poultney.

Though Miller's education was typical for his day, he had an unusual passion to learn. His mother taught him to read using the family's only books—the Bible, a Psalter, and an old hymnbook. In addition, he attended school for about three months each year from the ages of nine to fourteen. By borrowing books from neighbors and reading by firelight at night, Miller was able to further expand his knowledge.[10] His father, anxious that he not overtax himself and thus become less helpful in working the family farm, forbade him to study late at night. A perusal of Miller's diary from 1798 to 1803 reveals that he did in fact keep busy planting, tending, and harvesting.[11] But in spite of the pressure of earning a living, Miller developed a talent for prose and poetry and distinguished himself by writing "verse" for decorated cards. He was jokingly dubbed the "scribbler-general."[12]

After his marriage to Lucy P. Smith on June 29, 1803, the couple settled in Lucy's hometown of Poultney, Vermont. Lucy's parents Ebenezer Smith and Lucy Stearns had come to Poultney from Canaan, Connecticut, about

1785 as some of the earliest settlers.[13] Lucy understood her husband's passion to learn and supported his use of the Poultney library.[14] Together they had ten children of which eight survived—six sons and two daughters.[15]

As a young man, Miller wrote a patriotic verse that brought him popularity in his community. By 1809 he was appointed as a constable and subsequently served as a sheriff and justice of the peace. Except for an interruption for military service, Miller continued his public service until 1834.[16]

The community leaders in Poultney, Vermont, were deists. Their influence, together with his doubts about the reasonableness of Christianity, caused Miller to turn away from his Baptist roots to deism.[17] He remained a deist from about 1804 until 1816. During this time two aspects of deism particularly troubled him—the idea of the annihilation of individuals at death and the lack of divine providence in human affairs. Questions on these ideas would finally cause him to turn back to his Christian roots.

In 1810 Miller was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Vermont State militia. Two years later, at the commencement of the war with Great Britain, he received a captain's commission in the volunteer militia. In due course he was transferred to the regular army of the United States as a lieutenant and, after gathering recruits in Rutland, Vermont, was elevated to the rank of captain. In 1814 he and his soldiers were at Plattsburg, New York, beside Lake Champlain. During the first eleven days of September, they participated in a decisive engagement with the British that likely helped to bring the war to an end.[18]

After an honorable discharge from the military in 1815, Miller moved his family from Poultney, Vermont, to his parents' homestead in nearby Low Hampton, New York. He built a comfortable home that today is maintained as a historic landmark and museum by Adventist Heritage Ministry, a church-controlled organization in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Miller's military experiences and the realization "that deism was inseparably connected with, and did tend to, the denial of a future existence" led him to choose "the heaven and hell of the Scriptures."[19] He and other deist veterans were deeply affected by a sermon preached on the first anniversary of the Battle of Plattsburg. The next Sunday as Miller read a sermon on "parental duties" by Alexander Proudfit, he was overcome with emotion at his own shortcomings. With eloquent words he described his feelings:

> Annihilation was a cold and chilling thought, and accountability was sure destruction to all. The heavens were as brass over my head, and the earth as iron under my feet. *Eternity!—what was it? And death—why was it?* The more I reasoned, the further I was from demonstration. The more I

> thought, the more scattered were my conclusions. I tried to stop thinking, but my thoughts would not be controlled. I was truly wretched, but did not understand *the cause*. I murmured and complained, but knew not of whom. I knew that there was a wrong, but knew not how or where to find the right. I mourned, but without hope.[20]

Unexpectedly, during 1816, as he was struggling to find answers, Miller recollected that "the character of a Saviour was vividly impressed" upon his mind.[21] As he began to study the Bible, he was surprised by the relevance of the plan of salvation. The Bible, he concluded, provided reasonable answers to the human condition. He described his experience with these words:

> I saw that the Bible did bring to view just such a Savior as I needed; and I was perplexed to find how an uninspired book should develop principles so perfectly adapted to the wants of a fallen world. I was constrained to admit that the Scriptures must be a revelation from God. They became my delight; and in Jesus I found a friend. The Savior became to me the chiefest among ten thousand.…The Bible now became my chief study, and I can truly say, I searched it with great delight.[22]

Over a two-year period Miller carefully examined the Bible using only a Cruden's Concordance to determine whether the Bible was internally consistent and provided answers to deistic criticisms.[23] Through his study he was particularly impressed at how the prophecies concerning the first coming of Jesus had been literally fulfilled. In 1818, as he considered the prophecies of Daniel, he came "to the solemn conclusion, that in about twenty-five years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up."[24] After five more years of careful re-studying, he was "fully settled" that Jesus would come about the year 1843.[25]

Beginning sometime around 1823 Miller began to share his views with his friends and associates. His ability to organize ideas and express them eloquently, together with his position as a respected public servant and war veteran, opened opportunities for him to successfully convince others about the Bible and his ideas on prophecy. Miller did not consider himself a preacher or lecturer but frequently discussed his prophetic views with his friends and associates.

He was particularly successful in convincing friends and colleagues who were community leaders and clergy. His passion and eloquence are demonstrated in correspondence with a Baptist minister: "Where your hearers are not well indoctrinated, you must preach *Bible*; you must prove all things by *Bible*; you must talk *Bible*; you must exhort *Bible*; you must pray *Bible*, and love *Bible*; and do all in your power to make others love *Bible*, too."[26] Writing again to the same minister about the Second

Coming of Jesus, he demonstrated his ability to communicate in prose.

> Behold, the heavens grow black with clouds; the sun has veiled himself; the moon, pale and forsaken, hangs in middle air; the hail descends; the seven thunders utter loud their voices; the lightnings send their vivid gleams of sulphurous flame abroad; and the great city of the nations falls to rise no more forever and forever! At this dread moment, look! look! – O, look and see! What means that ray of light? The clouds have burst asunder; the heavens appear, the great white throne is in sight! Amazement fills the universe with awe! He comes! – he comes! Behold, the Saviour comes! Lift up your heads, ye saints, – he comes! he comes! – he comes![27]

By the early 1830s, after laboring some years for the conversion of his neighbors, friends, family, and various ministers, Miller began to feel a growing conviction to share his understanding of the prophecies and the soon coming of Jesus in a broader way. As a result, he wrote a series of sixteen articles which appeared in the *Vermont Telegraph* beginning in May 1832. Then during the summer and fall of 1832, he spent time attending protracted Finney-style meetings in nearby towns.[28] These meetings perhaps intensified his conviction to begin a preaching career. He felt an inner urging like a voice saying: "Go and tell the world of their danger."[29] By February 1833, eight ministers were preaching his "doctrine" and more than "one hundred private brethren" had adopted his views.[30] In 1833 Miller published his first tract of sixty-four pages based on his articles in the *Vermont Telegraph* under the title *Evidences from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843; and of His Personal Reign of One Thousand Years*.[31] Still he was not satisfied that he was fulfilling his duty.

It is a little unclear just when Miller began his public speaking career. Bliss's *Memoirs* implies that it was in 1831. Yet in separate recollections Miller clearly remembered first speaking in public on the prophecies "in the year 1832."[32] In 1845 he recollected that during the summer of 1833 he had a remarkable experience. The first Saturday morning in August, he promised the Lord that if he received an invitation to speak he would consider it a sign that he should begin a preaching career. Within half an hour, to his amazement and chagrin, a nephew arrived from Dresden, New York, with the invitation to speak on Sunday.[33]

It seems evident that Miller first worked for a number of years on a personal level, sharing and persuading people of his views; about the time that he wrote his articles for the *Vermont Telegraph,* he had given at least one lecture. Then in 1833 he decided to lay aside his secular pursuits and become a full-time minister of the gospel. An examination of

Miller's justice of the peace records shows that he continued his work in a regular way up until the summer of 1833 and then did little until a final brief session in February 1834.[34]

On September 14, 1833, he received a license to preach from the Baptist Church where he was a member.[35] By 1836 he was carrying a certificate with the signatures of between seventy and eighty ministers who supported his preaching.[36] In the same year his expanded sixteen-lecture series was published by Isaac Westcott in Troy, New York, titled *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year 1843: Exhibited in a Course of Lectures*.[37]

During 1838 and 1839, Miller's influence continued to expand, though his impact on New England remained modest. In March 1838, Charles Fitch, a prominent abolitionist and holiness preacher, accepted Miller's views after reading *Evidence from Scripture*. Then Josiah Litch, a well-known Methodist minister, accepted Miller's prophetic chronology and immediately began to publish the message.[38] In November 1839, Miller met his most important convert, Joshua V. Himes, at Exeter, New Hampshire. As pastor of the Chardon Street Christian Chapel in Boston, Massachusetts, Himes was an active temperance reformer and abolitionist. By March 1840, Himes began publication of the *Signs of the Times*, later called the *Advent Herald*. With his considerable skills as a publicist, the movement rapidly gained momentum. Miller later wrote of his appreciation of Himes: "He has stood by me at all times, periled his reputation, and by the position in which he has been placed, has been more instrumental in the spread of these views than any other ten men who have embarked on the cause."[39]

In commenting on his influence, Miller noted, "Infidels, Deists, Universalists and sectarians, were all chained to their seats, in perfect silence, for hours,—yes, days,—to hear the old stammering man talk about the second coming of Christ."[40] A correspondent of Miller remarked that he had "never witnessed so powerful an effect in any place, as in this, on all who heard." He believed that at least "one hundred persons, who held infidel sentiments," were brought to "believe the Bible."[41] In place after place where he preached, people where either converted or "quickened" to new spiritual life.

In 1840, as another edition of Miller's lectures was published, Miller was moving toward the pinnacle of his influence.[42] During the year and a half from October 1839 to April 1841, Miller traveled more than 4,500 miles and gave 627 lectures in dozens of churches throughout the Northeast and Quebec.[43]

By the summer of 1842, however, public sentiment was turning more

aggressively against Miller. The negative reaction, combined with the ever larger crowds of interested hearers, led to open meetings in tents more than town meetings in churches. It was at a campground in East Kingston, New Hampshire, in early July 1842 that the decision was made to purchase a large tent that seated more than 3,000 people. By August the tent was in use. During the next couple of years, dozens of camp meetings were held with attendances overflowing the capacity of the great tent.[44]

With the dawn of 1843, attention was focused on the time of the Second Advent and Miller's conflict with ministers and the public press became sharp and frequent. As some were claiming that Miller believed Jesus would come in April 1843, he decided to quell the agitation by giving a range of time rather than a specific month.[45] He wrote to Himes on February 4, 1844: "Jesus Christ will come again to the earth, cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same, with all his saints, some time between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. I have never, for the space of more than twenty-three years, had *any other time preached or published by me*; I have never fixed on any month, day, or hour, during that period."[46]

Formal publications steadily appeared that countered Miller's application of the year-day principle to the prophecies and other aspects of his interpretation. By following the historicist approach of prophetic interpretation with a pre-millennialist orientation, Miller's teaching sharpened the fault lines among prophetic interpreters. Critics such as George Burnap, John Hopkins, Enoch Pond, John Dowling, and many others published refutations of Miller's views.[47]

After the passing of the spring expectation in 1844, Miller wrote to fellow believers: "I *confess my error*, and acknowledge *my disappointment*; yet I still believe that the day of the Lord is near, even at the door."[48] Still he continued to preach the soon coming of Jesus. From July to September 1844 he traveled to Canada, Western New York, and even Ohio.[49]

While Miller was traveling, Samuel Snow and a growing number of people were embracing October 22, 1844, as the date for the Second Coming.[50] Seeing the Day of Atonement of the Jewish year as typical of the cleansing of the sanctuary, they concluded that Jesus would come that fall. Miller and those most closely associated with him did not accept the date until near the expected time. Bliss observed that the October date was the "*only* specific *day* which was regarded by intelligent Adventists with any positiveness."[51]

After the October 1844 disappointment, Miller and most other active Adventists maintained faith in their system of prophetic interpretation. Miller wrote on November 10: "Although I have been twice disappointed,

I am not yet cast down or discouraged.…I have now much more evidence that I do believe in God's word. My mind is perfectly calm, and my hope in the coming of Christ is as strong as ever."[52]

During the first months following the disappointment, Miller concluded that Jesus would come by the spring of 1845. He additionally believed that his work of warning the world was concluded and that probation had closed.[53] In early March 1845, J. V. Himes came to Miller's home in Low Hampton, New York, and was able to convince him to abandon these positions. Nevertheless, Millerite Adventism remained split over whether the fall 1844 date remained prophetically relevant.

As his health declined after 1844, Miller preached on a more limited basis. By January 1848 his eyesight had dimmed to where he was not able to read or write. Even with this disability, he continued infrequent correspondence with the help of his son and others.[54] During 1848 Miller arranged for the construction of a simple chapel near the granite protrusion to the west of his home as he and other Adventists were no longer welcome in the local Baptist Church.

Toward the end of his life, a visitor described Miller as "much swollen with dropsy" or edema.[55] Yet until the last, his mind remained clear. He had one final exhortation: "Tell them [the brethren] we are right,—the coming of the Lord draweth nigh—but they must be patient, and wait for him."[56] Miller died on Thursday, December 20, 1849, and was buried in the Low Hampton Cemetery near his home. A memorial service was held at the Congregational church in Fairhaven.[57] His gravestone appropriately contains quotations, in order, from Daniel 8:14, 7:12, and 12:13. The last text reads: "But go thou thy way till the end be, for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days."

Miller's Theological Contribution to Adventism

William Miller, as the leader and foremost proponent of American Adventism, laid a theological foundation that has remained significant for the Adventist denominations that arose after 1844.

Fundamental to Miller's theology was the role of the Bible. He believed the Bible could be understood, was consistent with itself, answered human need, and revealed God's plan for the future.[58] As a former deistic rationalist he expected the Bible to make sense. At one point he even referred to his personal Bible study as a "feast of reason."[59] Miller was successful in his revival meetings because he took the people with him step by step until no option remained other than the one he was

presenting. The biblical reasonableness of Millerism brought a certainty that became a compelling power.

Undoubtedly, Miller's eschatological system was his most important theological contribution to Adventism. It was not a single idea—even that Jesus would come about the year 1843—that was most significant. Rather, it was that Miller had a complete biblical system that interpreted the Bible from a historicist perspective.

Using the year-day principle, he applied different time prophecies—such as the seventy weeks of Daniel 9, the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14, the 1,260 days (or time, times, and half a time) of Daniel 7:25, 12:7, and Revelation 12:14, among other scriptural passages—to historical events beginning in Daniel's day and continuing down to the late eighteenth century and to about 1843. He argued that these time periods pointed to the Second Coming of Jesus which he understood to be literal, visible, and personal. His insistence on an imminent pre-millennial Second Coming of Jesus cut directly against the temporal utopian post-millennialism of Charles Finney and other millennialists of his day. Miller emphasized that the Second Coming would result in the destruction of the wicked and the earth with fire. His view left no room for a second chance or a future conversion of the world. Probation for the world would end by the Second Coming. Then the righteous dead would be resurrected to join the living saints and live for 1,000 years in a perfectly restored earth.

Ironically, none of the individual theological elements within Miller's eschatological framework were new or unique. People could intellectually connect to what he was saying and were convinced as he brought the various parts together. Miller's comprehensive progression, carefully argued from history and scripture, radically altered people's worldview. No longer could a convinced person remain indifferent or uncommitted. Conviction commonly led to an overwhelming urgency that transformed people's goals and lifestyle.

Though compelled by his study to adopt an innovative eschatological structure, Miller was in many ways a traditionalist. He remained true to his Baptist roots. Yet the dynamic nature of the movement prepared the way for others to adopt views that he rejected. Such views set forth by some of his followers included conditionalism, the call out of Protestant churches as Babylon, the setting of specific dates for the Second Coming, sabbatarianism, and modern prophetic manifestations.

Miller also inadvertently presented ideas that brought schism after 1844 and became important transitional theological concepts for later forms of adventism. Perhaps the most important was the idea of the

Bridegroom and the shut door. Miller connected his cleansing of the sanctuary understanding of Daniel 8:14 to the parable of the Bridegroom and the ten virgins of Matthew 25:1-13 and to the first angel's message of Revelation 14, which called for a proclamation of the gospel in light of the final judgment. Miller saw that final judgment as occurring at the Second Advent. He connected the shut door of Matthew 25:6 with the close of Jesus' mediatorial work just before the Second Coming. These concepts transferred to Bridegroom or shut door Adventists after 1844 and became the basis for a division within Adventist ranks. Some of Miller's followers transferred the concept of the cleansing of the earth as the sanctuary to a heavenly sanctuary. That later insight became an important theological concept for Sabbatarian Adventism and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Major Works on the Millerite Movement

Since the 1844 disappointment, numerous scholarly studies and publications have appeared that treat William Miller and American Adventism. There are several general periods or eras in the history of Millerite studies. First there were the biographical and historical accounts of the movement written during Miller's life or shortly after his death by those most closely associated with him. Second, between 1874 and 1920 a few apologetic biographies and historical studies were published by Adventist individuals or organizations. Third, from the 1920s to about 1950, readers had to choose between either anecdotal and critical approaches or apologetic works by Adventists. The first formal academic studies of the Millerite movement appeared during this period. Fourth, in about 1950 a transition began that would bring Millerite studies more into the mainstream of academic thought in the United States. By the 1970s and 1980s, numerous historians emerged who focused on Millerite Adventism within the context of the social, economic, and cultural setting of nineteenth-century antebellum America. It should be noted that during the twentieth century only a few studies gave particular attention to the internal dynamics and theology of the Millerite movement. Those that did were invariably produced by Adventists. Today a need remains for scholarly biographical study of William Miller and attention to particular aspects of Millerism. Perhaps the next decade will see these deficiencies addressed.

In this section, a brief overview will be given of the most important denominational, critical, or scholarly publications of or about Miller and Millerism. It is not the purpose of this outline to be comprehensive but

rather to highlight overall trends. The three autobiographical/biographical accounts of William Miller that are reprinted in this volume will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

In 1874 and 1875 two significant works were published on Miller and the advent movement by representatives of two of the major Millerite-inspired entities that emerged after 1844. In 1874 Isaac C. Wellcome, an Advent Christian, published a *History of the Second Advent Message*, which included extensive biographical material on Miller.[60] The volume contained much additional material beyond what appeared in Bliss's 1853 *Memoirs*. Wellcome took a critical posture towards those who later contributed to the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is important to note that he had available primary sources that are no longer extant. Thus his book remains an essential resource for study of Millerite Adventism.

In 1875 James White, a Seventh-day Adventist, published a book-length biography of Miller titled *Sketches of the Christian Life and Public Labors of William Miller*.[61] White acknowledged his heavy dependence upon Bliss's *Memoirs*, though he did draw attention to correspondence by Miller that supported positions held by Seventh-day Adventists. He took the liberty to add a number of footnotes, some lengthy, that connected Miller's positions to Seventh-day Adventist doctrine and experience. Indirectly this publication was a response to Wellcome's history.

Some twenty years later, in 1895, the Advent Christian Church published another book-length biography of Miller's life. The book drew heavily from Bliss's *Memoirs* though it did reference other sources such as Wellcome's history, an old record book kept by Miller from 1839 to 1843, and an interview with Miller's youngest daughter, Lucy Ann Bartholomew.[62] In 1915 the Seventh-day Adventist Church republished the Advent Christian biography with a tipped-in title page from their publishing house—the Review and Herald.[63] Though having divergent theological positions, both the Advent Christians and the Seventh-day Adventists realized that they cherished similar roots.

In addition to the above works, the nineteenth century saw book-length autobiographies by Millerites published by both Seventh-day Adventists[64] and Advent Christians[65] that gave additional details on the history of the movement.

From the 1920s to about 1950, a major shift in Adventist studies occurred as those directly connected with the 1844 experience passed away. The Advent Christians and Seventh-day Adventists published histories of their denominations that included important elements from the Millerite period.[66] These publications gave a broad history for the