Herald of the Midnight Cry

William Milller & The 1844 Movement

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Introduction

If you had lived in the United States 150 years ago, it is likely you would have heard of William Miller, and you probably would have had a strong opinion about him one way or another. Newspapers seemed to delight in publishing wild, false rumors about him. The religious magazines, too, were almost always against Miller. But if you had heard him preach, you would have felt more positive about him.

In the 1840s television and radio didn't exist, but news traveled fast just the same. On the street, you might have heard a conversation like this:

"Have you heard that farmer preach? He sure knows his Bible."

"No, but he's wrong. Jesus can't return for at least a thousand years. He's a crazy old man, I tell you. Did you read that story in the paper about him?" "Yes, but you can't believe all you read."

Those who heard William Miller preach found him interesting. He could demonstrate what he said, both from the Bible and history.

People of all ages came to hear him preach. And he always drew large crowds. One account, from Boston, illustrates this:

> All day and evening the seats and aisles were filled with as many as could find a place to sit or stand; and many of the young, with the middle-aged, and even the man with grey hairs, patiently stood and listened to the story of the Coming One.[*]

People who heard him preach about Jesus' coming found they couldn't get his sermon out of their minds, probably because he said Jesus would return in their lifetime—1843 or 1844. But it was also because they knew that Miller himself was convinced of what he was talking about. He could give chapter and verse from the Bible to answer all their questions.

It must have been something like listening to Noah when he preached about the flood. And those who watched him build the ark had more proof that he meant what he said. It was like that with William Miller.

Why is William Miller, a Baptist preacher from the mid-1800s, so important to Seventh-day Adventists? It is because he is the father of the modern second-advent movement. Those who began our church were

[*] *The Advent Herald*, February 14, 1844.

Millerites first—followers of William Miller's preaching. Though his preaching ended in the Great Disappointment, even that experience fulfilled Bible prophecy.

John, author of the book of Revelation, was told in vision to take a little book from an angel. When he took it, he was told to "eat it" (Revelation 10:8–10). When he did, it was sweet in his mouth and bitter in his stomach. This little book was Daniel—the book from which Miller found the prophecy he thought predicted Christ's second corning. When Miller and others read (ate) the book of Daniel and the prophecy, they found it sweet to expect Christ's coming, but bitter when He didn't return.

The Great Disappointment suffered by William Miller and his followers has been compared to that of Jesus' disciples when He was crucified. The disciples were expecting Jesus to become the literal Saviour of the Jewish nation. Instead, Jesus had come to die, to save the world. The disciples did not understand all that Jesus needed to do before they would be saved. Neither did Miller.

But Miller was right in expecting Christ to come soon. He believed the second advent was to happen in his lifetime.

Adventists today believe Jesus could come in our lifetime, too, but we don't set a year like Miller did. Yet we know it is very soon. Most of the promised signs have happened, and we need to be ready every day. We are about to join with John who said:

"I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle." "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 14:14; 22:20).

Paul A. Gordon

Chapter 1

More Than School

In the nineteenth century, most never graduated from the eighth grade. It wasn't because they couldn't learn, but because the opportunity for more school just wasn't there. If you had five or six years of classroom learning, you were about average. Those born on a farm, like William Miller was, found even fewer opportunities for school. In 1801, when he was eighteen, only twenty-five colleges of all kinds existed in the United States.

Those who wanted more education had to get it outside of school, and on their own. It meant hard work; learning without a teacher, and with books not easily available. Private schools were meant only for the rich.

Some people are willing to sit back and settle for what life gives them. But young Miller refused to settle for what he had. His voracious reading as a boy encouraged him to better himself. William Miller's reading gave him skills that led to a prominent place in his local community. It later led to a commitment to Jesus through his systematic study of the Bible. He was finally compelled to be a preacher of the second advent of Christ.

William Miller's father, also named William, served as a teenage soldier in the American army during the Revolutionary War. After the war, in 1781, Miller's father met and married Paulina Phelps, daughter of a Baptist preacher. He was twenty-three, and she was only sixteen. William—her first child—was born a year later, on February 15, 1782, at Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Paulina Miller gave birth to sixteen children in all, five boys and eleven girls.

It was the most important period in the history of America to that time. Six years before Miller's birth, in 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed. And when young William was only seven years old, George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the United States of America in New York City, on April 30, 1789.

With a father who had served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War and a mother who was a preacher's daughter, young William was strongly influenced in two rather different directions. Though his father never made a public profession of religion, his home often served as a place where neighbors gathered to hear traveling ministers preach before a church building was established.

In 1786, when William was four years old, the family moved to Low Hampton, New York. Largely an uninhabited wilderness, Low Hampton featured a handful of farms scattered over several miles. William's father secured 100 acres on a lease with agreement to pay twenty bushels of wheat annually as rent. The family was not wealthy, but typical of farmers in that area. Shortly after coming to Low Hampton, Miller's father was promoted to captain in the militia of New York State.

From his parents, young William received certain attributes that shaped his life. From his father, he learned the role of patriot and soldier. From his mother, piety and a religious outlook. His later life demonstrated both of these interests. And for a time they came in direct conflict with each other.

The beginnings of conflict started early for young William. Between the ages of seven and ten, with a sense of the need of a Saviour, he tried to invent some way to be accepted by God.

First, he tried being "very good." "I will do nothing wrong, tell no lies, and obey my parents," he said. But he wasn't happy.

Next, he thought he would sacrifice. "I will give up the most cherished objects I possess." But this didn't bring him happiness either. This experience in childhood, however, made him more thoughtful and serious.[1] This conflict was resolved later in a way that he certainly could not anticipate.

William was taught to read by his mother. He first went to school at age nine. From then until age fourteen, he attended a one-room school near his home for three months each winter. Miller received a total of eighteen months of formal education.[†] One reason William did not continue school longer was that his skills exceeded those of the teachers. Not being able to afford candles, he saved pine knots and read by their light at the fireplace after his day's chores were done.

William's desire for reading went far beyond the few schoolbooks available. He purchased his first personal book, *The History of Robinson Crusoe*, with money he earned chopping wood. Other adventure and fictional books were also read. He read history and books on law, as well. Books were also loaned to him by prominent men in his community who were impressed by his desire for knowledge.

[†] William Miller was not the only early Adventist with such limited formal education. James White had twenty-nine weeks; Ellen White three years; J. N. Andrews went to school only until age eleven; and Joseph Bates till fourteen, the same age as Miller.

His family couldn't afford to send fourteen-year-old William for more formal education at a private school. But William knew of a wealthy Doctor Smith in his community. Perhaps, young William thought, if he wrote a letter requesting financial help, the doctor would sponsor the education he so much craved. Sitting down one day to prepare such a letter, he was discovered by his father in the middle of writing, and was never allowed to send the letter.

At the age of fifteen, William began a diary as a permanent record of his life. It was a rather ambitious project. On the title page, dated July 10, 1797, appeared the following: "The History of My Life." Little did he realize at that time what that history would be.

The first page of the diary says simply: "I was early educated and taught to pray the Lord." His mother had done the teaching. The first day-by-day entry, put in several months later, tells of the events of March 11, 1798: "Sunday—grandfather preached at our house from Psalms 23, 4th verse, from Colossians 3, 1st verse. I lay at home. Rainy day."[2] William was now sixteen.

One thing seemed certain at this early date in his life; William Miller would not be average. He had begun to prepare for a significant place in his home community and in the history of the future Seventh-day Adventist Church.

1. Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), pp. 26, 27.
2. Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1944), p. 19.