

# ASCENSION ROBES

*and Other Millerite Fables*

Pictures  
Removed

*The Millerites in  
American Literature*

BY JAMES EHRLICH

Pictures  
Removed

**E**arly in the 19th century James Fenimore Cooper complained that in America “there are no annals for the historian; no follies (beyond the most vulgar and commonplace) for the satirist; no manners for the dramatists; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; no gross and hardy offenses against decorum for the moralist; nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of poetry.”

By the 1830s and 1840s all this had changed, however. Not only had American writers—largely with Cooper’s help—discovered the Indian, frontiersman, and American nature as themes for their literature, but the “freedom’s ferment” of the Jacksonian period had created some of the social diversity that

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Cooper had felt necessary for great literature. Along with the utopians, abolitionists, and feminists who caught the attention of writers both great and common, the Millerites stimulated a reaction of humor and sympathy.

The Millerites, of course, were followers of William Miller, the New York Baptist farmer who interpreted the biblical book of Daniel to mean that Christ would return sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. Miller preached these ideas widely in the 1830s and 1840s, attracting perhaps as many as 50,000 believers. After Miller’s predictions failed to come to pass, Samuel S. Snow, one of his followers, re-examined Daniel, determined that Miller had made a mistake, and announced that Christ would come on October 22, 1844. This prophecy rekindled the hopes of the Millerites, hopes that were dashed as October 22 came and passed without special event. As a result, the movement began to break apart amidst a flood of scorn and abuse.

Not surprisingly, the Millerite prediction of a date for Christ's coming caught the fancy of the fiction writers. In the fictional view, time setting gained acceptance among the credulous by its impressive mathematical calculations. Edward Eggleston, a former Methodist minister, portrayed Millerism in *The End of the World* as an exciting diversion for bored village folk. As Eggleston told it, since there are no circuses or murders to divert the people's attention, they flock to hear Elder Hankins when he comes into Sugar Grove announcing that the world will end at midnight, August 11, 1843. It is his calculation that makes Hankins' prediction incontrovertible, at least to most people, for he argues that "figgers won't lie noways, and it's figgers that shows this yet to be the last yer of the world, and that the final end of all things is approachin'." He does not ask people to listen to any of his own impressions or reasonings, only that they just "listen to the voice of the man in the linen-coat what spoke to Dan'el, and then listen to the voice of the 'rithmetic, and to a sum in simple addition, the simplest sort of addition."

Everyone seems to believe Hankins, however, except Jonas, a new hired hand on one of the local farms. One night at Elder Hankins' meeting at the church, Jonas comments to a friend:

*Looky thar, won't you? He'll cipher the world into nothin' in no time. He's like the feller that tried to find out the valoo of a fat shoat when wood was two dollars a cord. "Ef I can't do it by subtraction I'll do it by long-division," say he. And ef this 'rithmetic preacher can't make a finishment of this sublunary speer by addition, he'll do it by multiplyin'. They's only one answer in his book. Gin him any sum you please, and it all comes out 1843!*

Jonas complains that July fourths are all over along with shooting firecrackers and the star-spangled banner because Hankins "ciphers and ciphers and then spits on his slate and wipes us all out. Whenever Gabr'el blows I'll believe it, but I won't take none o' Hankins tootin' in place of it."

The calculating aspect also appeared in Mary E. Wilkins' story of "A New England Prophet." Again, a skeptic comments that the Millerite has to "twist passages hindmost, foremost, and bottomside up, an' add, an' subtract, an' divide, an' multiply, an' hammer, an' saw, an' bile down, an' take to a gristmill" before he gets the desired meaning. These two stories were written toward the end of the 19th century, but specific dates also appeared in Asmodeus's *The Millerite Humbug* and C. A. P.'s "A Millerite Miracle" that were contemporary with the Millerite movement. So

strong was the date-setting image of Millerism in fiction that it occurred as late as 1972 when Henry Carlisle mentioned it in *Voyage to the First of December*.

Time setting had a basis in historical fact, but the ascension robes that many authors brought into their stories seem to be mostly fictional. Not that they were originally regarded that way, however. After October 22, 1844, several newspapers carried the story that

pared their ascension robes to be lifted up in clouds of glory while the worn-out, weary world was to burn with fire," and then [be] renewed. Edward Eggleston also briefly noted that "some made ascension robes" as the religious excitement reached its climax on August 11, 1843. Similarly, Mary E. Wilkins' Millerite prophet, Solomon, admonishes his followers to "Repent, Repent! Prepare your ascension robes. Renounce the world, and all

THE  
MILLERITE HUMBUG;

OR THE

Raising of the Wind!!

A Comedy

IN FIVE ACTS,

AS PERFORMED WITH UNBOUNDED  
APPLAUSE IN BOSTON AND OTHER  
PARTS OF THE UNION!

COMPILED AND ARRANGED  
BY ASMODEUS IN AMERICA,  
"OR THE DEVIL ON TWO STICKS."

BOSTON:  
PRINTED FOR THE PUBLISHER.  
1845.

*This satirical Millerite play ironically may have been performed in the Boston Tabernacle erected by the Millerites in 1843 and sold in 1845 to an organization for theatrical productions.*

the Millerites had worn ascension robes on that fateful night while awaiting the coming of their Lord. As far as can be determined, though, little of this sort happened.

Nevertheless, the reports of ascension robes first made their way into fiction in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's short story "Kavanaugh," in 1849. The story refers to Millerites as a fanatical group that "had pre-

the lust and the vanity thereof." As the Millerites head for the hill to "ascend," their neighbors peep through their curtains "to see the white-robed figures move along the road. Every now and then little children would shriek in terror at the sight of them."

In her story "The Last Day," Marietta Holley imaginatively described how the robes were made and worn. Patterned after night-

gowns and made of white book muslin, the robe was full around the neck with sleeves hanging down like wings. At a quarter to four on June 30, 1843, two of Holley's characters, Pelek and Miss Coon, put on their robes and wait for their ascension at 4:00 p.m., the appointed hour. As the great moment draws near, Pelek climbs on a high tree stump and Miss Coon stands on a chair, both eager to be nearer heaven. Then at 4:00 everyone shouts and screams while Pelek and Miss Coon wave their arms. With their two great white wings "a flutterin'," they "sprung upwards, expectin' the hull world, livin' and dead would foller . . . and go right up into heaven singing,

*Farewell my friends,*

*Farewell my foes;*

*Up to heaven*

*Peal Jackson goes."*

Alas, what goes up comes down; since Miss Coon jumps from a chair she receives only bruises, whereas Pelek is laid up for several days with broken bones.

Underneath the date setting and ascension robes, however, lay the fact that fiction writers portrayed the Millerites, in the words of John Greenleaf Whittier, as "a class of uncultivated, and in some cases, gross minds." This belief that the Millerites were uneducated apparently prompted the extensive use of dialect in the stories. Some writers also distinguished the leaders and followers, picturing unscrupulous preachers taking advantage of their uncultivated listeners. For example, a play titled *The Millerite Humbug; or the Raising of the Wind* clearly presented Millerism as a fraud perpetrated upon the ignorant masses. The author, writing under the pseudonym "Asmodeus in America" in 1845, stated that he wrote the play because of his "conviction that many have been deluded and finally ruined by this popular frenzy." He hoped his work "might awaken some who are still slumbering in this Humbug." His prologue begins:

*You've often heard, my friend, no doubt of me,*

*Of my grand plan and scheme of '43—*

*This is the modern way to Raise the Wind,  
To gull the folks and humbug all mankind!*

*Be not severe and do not quick condemn—  
I've many friends, that rank with honest men.*

*My name is known in ev'ry Town and State,  
And with the World, for humbug can compete.*

*But as the order of the day is gain,*

*I trust you will not my great plot disdain.*

*If it should merit your applause, once more  
I'd try and gull them with year '44!*

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In the play, "The Great Leader's" prediction having failed for 1843, he moves the date ahead to 1844, meanwhile encouraging the believers to bring their money and jewelry to fill the treasury. Their wealth is unnecessary to them, he argues, since they will be "going up." Furthermore, they cannot ascend unless they give their money to the "Great Leader." "As You Say," a fellow humbugger, observes, "It is surprising that people can be duped in this way." If the Advent did not occur in 1844, then the "Great Leader" plans to move the date ahead to 1846, for this gives two more years to fill the treasury and run away. But the Millerites finally discover the plan to delude them and demand their property and money back. Thus "such a band of jobbers and a gang of robbers" can no longer raise the wind. Similarly, the anonymous author of "A Millerite Miracle" called William Miller "the arch deceiver . . . and humbug."

But whatever the motivation of the Millerite leaders, the people who followed them impressed the fiction writers with their credulity. In "A Millerite Miracle," the women grow pale from fasting and praying in preparation for the Coming after the *Morning Howl* and *Noonday Yell*, fictional Millerite papers, circulate through their villages. As the author continues his story, this gullibility provides the opportunity for a practical joke. On April 3, 1844, a group of Millerites meet on the outskirts of a small town in the state of Hoosierana for the "[grand] and lofty tumbling" or Second Coming. Among those assembled is Sam, a free Negro, who had managed to sneak into the meeting against the wishes of the leader. Cabe Newham, a local prankster, and his friends are also there, but for mischievous rather than religious reasons. That morning,

Cabe had thrown a half-inch rope over a tree branch that hung directly over the meeting place. Now with the excitement "getting about 'eighty pounds to the inch,'" Cabe slips into the crowd, grabs the end of the rope and ties it to Sam's belt as best he can. All of a sudden, in the dim light of the evening, Sam exclaims, "Gor Almighty! I'se a goin' up! Who-o-oh!" and sure enough, Sam is seen "mounting into the 'ethereal blue.'" Some faint, others pray, and "not a few dropped their robes and 'slid.'"

Another example of this Millerite credulity was the element of superstition that appeared in Eggleston's *End of the World* where a Millerite farmer, Samuel Anderson, plants his crops "in the 'light' of the moon and his potatoes in the 'dark' of the orb" and kills "his hogs when the moon was on the increase lest the meat should go to gravy." He also guards carefully "against the carrying of a hoe through the house, for fear 'somebody might die.'"

The naivete of the Millerites appeared most fully, however, in their actions during the last days, particularly in their neglect of worldly affairs as they prepare for the ascension. In Wilkins' "A New England Prophet," the Millerites become slack in following their daily routines. One finds that "kitchen tables [were] piled high with unwashed dishes, the hearths unswept and the fires low, the pantry shelves were bare and often the children went to bed with only the terrors of the judgment for sustenance." Farmers do not feed their cattle, leaving them to stand near the fences lowing piteously. Worldly delights lose their appeal in the light of eternity when Simeon, a skeptic, asks Mrs. Solomon for a piece of mince pie. She answers shrieking, "I shall make no more pies in this world, Simeon Lennox. . . . Woe be to you if you think of such things in the face of death and eternal condemnation!"

Doubting that his brother Solomon believes in the Second Coming, Simeon says, "Tell you what I'll do. I'll put ye to the test." Since Solomon has been predicting the end of the world to happen next Thursday, earthly goods are unnecessary. Therefore, Simeon challenges, "S'pose—you give me a deed of this 'ere farm? . . . Me to take possession by daylight next Friday mornin', if the world don't come to an end Thursday night." Solomon just glares at his brother, wondering what to do. Finally, with a look of hostility and bitterness, he agrees. They hire a lawyer to draw up the papers and all is set—until the Second Coming next Thursday. But on Friday the sun rises bright as ever, and Simeon is a property owner. Later on Simeon deeds the land

back to Solomon, but meanwhile as the “morning shone broadly into the room over them all,” Solomon mopes around unattentive to anyone, just “sitting sadly within himself: a prophet brooding over the ashes of his own prophetic fire.”

Miss Newman Coon, true to her character in “The Last Day,” finds fault with Josiah and his wife, the non-Millerite friends with whom she is staying, for going about their daily work on the last day. Josiah repairs his planting bag and his wife works in the kitchen. “I should think *respect*, respect for the great and fearful thought of meetin’ the Lord, would scare you out of the idea of goin’ on with your work,” Miss Coon grouses. Very calmly Josiah’s wife replies that she believes “in layin’ holt of the duty next to [a person] and doin’ *some* of the things He has commanded.” She likes “the most solid practical parts of religion, than the ornamental . . .” or “the power they sometimes have at camp, and other meetings.”

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson in Eggleston’s *End of the World* dismiss their employees and pay their accounts in preparation. They also want to sell their land, but to whom? Andrew Anderson, Samuel Anderson’s brother, and Bob Walker are bidding on the land, but Mrs. Anderson will not let Andrew buy it because he is a skeptic (and because he had once courted her but would not give in to her strong will). Also, when Sam’s father had died, the land was to be divided between the two brothers; Mrs. Anderson had contested the will and now fears retaliation. So they sell the land to Bob Walker for \$50. Unknown to Sam and his wife, Bob immediately deeds the land over to Andrew!

On the eleventh of August, the sun rises in its glory. People point at it and say that “it would rise no more.” As the day grows older and hotter, men believe it is the “scorching heat . . . that [is] to melt the elements!” That evening every “shooting-star” was a new sign of the end . . . and the simple-hearted countryfolk were convinced that the stars were falling out of the sky.” As the Millerites head toward the ascension hill they pass two unbelievers on their way to be married and say, “See! marrying and giving in marriage, as in the days of Noah!” But the next day dawns, crushing Millerite hopes, leaving Eggleston’s characters “sunk in despondency,” turning to “blankest atheism and boldest immorality,” or “sitting about the house in a dumb and shiftless attitude.”

Such were the endings of most Millerite stories, the uncritical credulity of the people crashing bitterly against the hard wall of reality. To many of the writers, the Great Disap-

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pointment only underlined the ridiculousness of the original prediction, thus providing an additional source for humor. But for the sensitive observers, the humor was mixed with pathos and tragedy as they attempted to understand the Millerite experience.

Although these stories are fictional, they are nevertheless significant. Since most of them were written during or within a few years of the Millerite movement, they reveal elements of the popular reaction—the ridicule, the humor, and the charges of dishonesty. More important, the stories, especially those of the better known authors such as Eggleston and Wilkins, appeared at a time when American writers were beginning to explore the life of the common folk of the United States. For them Millerism was one more feature on the diverse and often bizarre American landscape. 🍀

*This article was originally written as a graduate school project at Andrews University and appeared in the Summer 1975 issue of Adventist Heritage. James M. Erlich has worked as a junior academy teacher in Minnesota, and is currently a computer specialist for the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. He lives in Eureka, Montana. The article is reprinted by permission from the author and Adventist Heritage.*

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