

## HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after the Millerite “Great Disappointment” of October 22, 1844, Isaac C. Wellcome published the first general history of the movement that had promoted the belief that the Second Advent of Jesus would take place on that date. By 1874 the Adventists had developed into several separate groups, among them the Evangelical Adventists, the Advent Christians, the Church of God, and the Seventh-day Adventists. Each group claimed to be the legitimate heir of William Miller and his teachings. Wellcome belonged to the Advent Christian branch and wrote his work not only to maintain memory of the Millerite movement, but also to demonstrate that the Advent Christians continued the original Millerite faith while, among competing groups, the Seventh-day Adventists had their origins in fanaticism and existed outside the recognized boundaries of Adventism. Part history and part apologetics, Wellcome’s *History of the Second Advent Message* nonetheless has become recognized as an important source of information about early Adventism that also gives insight into the movement’s self-understanding as it sought to define and preserve itself in the wake of bitter disappointment.

### Biographical Sketch

Isaac Wellcome was born in Minot, Maine, on May 8, 1818, to what was apparently a farming family, for he stated that while growing up he worked hard at farming and lumbering. Although Wellcome wrote that his father was “a thoroughly read and zealous believer in Universalism and possessed a large amount of that kind of literature,” he also said that his parents were not Christians.<sup>1</sup> This latter comment suggests that his parents may actually have been Deists, which was popularized in Northern New England by Ethan Allen.<sup>2</sup> At this point in time, Universalism was a Christian movement that advocated the belief that God had elected all humankind to be saved,<sup>3</sup> whereas Deism denied such cardinal Christian doctrines as the inspiration of the Bible and the Incarnation. Of course, with Wellcome’s conservative doctrinal views,

it is possible that he regarded Universalism as non-Christian, despite the opinions of contemporary society. In any case, while he had little formal education, Isaac was a voracious reader and “having an opportunity to read infidel works...soon became ‘a fool’ by denying the existence of any God but nature.”<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of the Second Great Awakening, which moved back and forth across New England to the western frontier throughout the first half of the nineteenth century,<sup>5</sup> Wellcome’s elder brother, Michael, converted to Christianity when Isaac was about eighteen years old. This event prompted Isaac to begin reading the Bible and Universalist writings, leading him to become a “confirmed, praying Universalist.”<sup>6</sup> Increasingly under the conviction that he was a sinner, Isaac accepted Jesus as his savior and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1840.

Meanwhile, William Miller, a New York farmer, had come to the conclusion, based upon his study of the prophecies of Daniel, that the Second Coming of Christ would occur about the year 1843. Under the leadership of Joshua V. Himes, a Boston Christian Connection minister, Miller’s ideas had produced a movement that published its first paper and held its first conferences in 1840 and soon was sending preachers and printed materials throughout the Northeast.<sup>7</sup> Wellcome, who seems to have already believed the premillennial doctrine of Christ’s return, in 1842 first read Miller’s *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843*, a collection of Miller’s lectures first published in 1836. After studying for two years and hearing a number of Millerite sermons, “he was constrained to acknowledge that the Bible fully sustained the general views taught by Adventists, excepting the time. This was a subject he considered too deep for him then. He had neither the books nor the ability to decide that the Lord would come on any given year.”<sup>8</sup>

Wellcome’s advocacy of Millerite views resulted in conflict with the Methodist church, which he left in September 1844 to join the Adventists, who in many cases were now separating from the established churches, which they frequently described as “Babylon.” One writer states that Isaac’s brothers, Michael and Solomon, also abandoned Methodism for the Millerites.<sup>9</sup> A few weeks later, largely on the basis that he respected those who were teaching it, Wellcome accepted the message of the 7th-month movement, which asserted that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844. After the Great Disappointment, when Jesus did not return as expected, Wellcome restudied the Millerite interpretations, concluding that the general understanding of prophecy was correct but that God

had not revealed the time of Christ's coming. About this same time, he accepted the doctrine of conditional immortality, the belief that humans "sleep" in death until the Second Coming when the saved receive immortality. This doctrine was becoming influential in Adventist circles.

Despite the Disappointment, the Wellcome brothers maintained their faith in Adventism. In 1846 Michael Wellcome left Maine for Wisconsin to preach the Adventist message. Solomon joined him three years later, opening a drug store and in 1870 receiving ordination as a lay preacher for the Advent Christian Church. Jacob, a physician, joined these brothers in 1857, apparently also participating with them in preaching services.<sup>10</sup>

Isaac, however, remained in Maine. Although called to preach, he resisted until 1848 because of illness and financial problems. After preaching for about two years, he received ordination in Boston from the General Annual Conference of Adventists. Subsequently, he traveled extensively throughout Maine, as well as elsewhere in New England and what is now called the Midwest. According to his account, he preached 100 to 200 times and traveled between 2,000 and 4,000 miles annually, all at his own expense, and supported himself through publishing religious works and operating a small drug store.<sup>11</sup> Advent Christian minister and historian Albert Johnson stated that Wellcome "preached nearly every Sunday, attended over one hundred campmeetings and was blessed in winning many souls to Christ."<sup>12</sup>

As the Adventist movement gradually developed more formal organization, Wellcome actively participated in what eventually became the Advent Christian Church. He served as a minister in the State Conference of Maine for some twenty years after it was organized in 1854 and was elected Vice-president for the State of Maine when the American Advent Mission Society formed in 1865. He also served for four years on the Board of the Advent Christian Publication Society and one year on the editorial committee of *The World's Crisis*, the emerging denomination's paper.<sup>13</sup>

But it was as an independent writer and publisher that Wellcome achieved his greatest influence. He wrote a number of pamphlets, among them *A Treatise on Matthew 24th and 25th Chapters* (1854), *A Pamphlet on War* (1862), and *The Duty and Object of Christian Baptism* (1863), as well as two books, *The Plan of Redemption* with Clarkson Goud (1866) and *History of the Second Advent Message* (1874). He also compiled Bible readings in *The Berean's Casket and Repository* (1869).

With coworkers he organized The Scriptural Publication Society and the Home and Foreign Tract Mission in 1872. Johnson stated that he

“took a very deep interest in foreign tract and mission work, and actively engaged in sending Adventual literature to several countries across the sea.”<sup>14</sup> In 1882 Wellcome recalled:

About 1870, a few Swedes, in Illinois, were converted to the faith of the Lord’s coming, and beginning with scanty means, translated and published in the Swedish language several of my works, and those of others. In 1881 they opened correspondence with me, asking the privilege to translate more, and my aid to publish more extensively. I had no funds of my own, but the Lord had, and I promised them help. They then organized the “Swedish Biblical Tract Society,” with its business head and printing office at Bishop Hill, Ill. Bro. John Chaiser, agent, Myself, treasurer, Yarmouth Me...I then sent out several thousand circulars, with sample tracts to our brethren in the faith, asking for money to carry on this work among the Swedes, and other nations also.<sup>15</sup>

Subsequently, he reported, this literature went to Swedes in North America, Sweden, Egypt, France, and England.

In addition to this Advent Christian related literature, Wellcome published other authors whom Advent Christian historian Clyde Hewitt has described as “broadly Adventist and conditionalist and not confined to Advent Christian writers.”<sup>16</sup> Among these works were J. H. Pettingell’s *The Unspeakable Gift* (1884) and *Views and Reviews in Eschatology* (1887), Charles E. Copp’s *Rod and Staff* (1889), A. C. Palmer’s *The One Fold and the Only Door* (1885), and Daniel Buck’s *Scripture Symbolism in Three Parts* (1887).<sup>17</sup> Regarding Pettingell, Johnson wrote that he “was again and again refused access to the columns of the papers of his own denomination, for friendly articles or reviews on the question [of conditional immortality] and turned to publishers of this faith for the issue of his later works and affiliated closely with Adventists in his last days.”<sup>18</sup>

Wellcome suffered a stroke in 1894. At its 1895 midwinter meeting the Advent Christian convention described him as “a father among this people” and resolved to “remember with appreciation the loyalty and earnestness with which he stood by his convictions of faith and duty in the service of his Master and...express for him our prayerful sympathy in this crucial experience, for which we feel that he is by rich grace abundantly prepared.”<sup>19</sup>

After Wellcome’s death in 1895 the Advent Christian Publication Society stated: “In his decease we recognize a great loss to the cause of truth and its dissemination, and greatly miss his venerable presence from the numerous gatherings of our people...we regard his missionary work...as a most noble labor of great interest and value to our whole

people and the general spread of adventual truth...we consider his work as a publisher to have been a great advantage to the cause of truth and worthy of a very special record in our history.”<sup>20</sup> Four years later this organization absorbed Wellcome’s Scriptural Publication Society.

Looking back in 1986 on Wellcome’s life, Hewitt wistfully observed that had he, along with others, “triumphed” over Miles Grant, an influential Advent Christian editor and evangelist, “subsequent Advent Christian history would undoubtedly have been quite different than it was.”<sup>21</sup> Whereas Grant was “cautious and conservative with a rather narrow view of the ways the Advent Christian people could serve their Lord,” Hewitt continued, Wellcome was among those who had a “broader vision with liberal and aggressive views” that sought to make the Advent Christian Publication Society “a large-scale, forward-looking operation.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly, Wellcome’s own work testified to his energetic vision, for after his death it was estimated that between 1872 and 1895 he had published and distributed 10 million tracts, 150 thousand books and pamphlets, and 200 thousand copies of the *Berean Quarterly*, the organ of the Scriptural Publication Society.<sup>23</sup>

### Early Millerite Historiography

Wellcome’s *History of the Second Advent Message* made an important contribution to a developing Millerite historiography. The Millerites had never expected to write histories of their movement, for they believed that Jesus’s Second Coming in 1843 or 1844 would end the present age and usher in the Millennium. The fact that Jesus did not return as predicted strongly influenced the histories that Miller’s spiritual descendents produced,<sup>24</sup> as they continued to assert the fundamental validity of his teaching and at the same time sought to come to terms with the error that, at least in popular consciousness, lay at the heart of the movement he spawned.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of a series of disappointments in 1843 and early 1844 when “the time is expired,”<sup>25</sup> Josiah Litch, a former Methodist minister and prominent Millerite preacher, sought to sustain the Adventist faith with its first historical account, published in May 1844. He affirmed the movement’s accomplishments as God-led and defended it against criticism. Dividing the movement’s development into five somewhat vaguely defined periods or phases, Litch said that the first stage began with Miller’s initial publications in the *Vermont Telegraph* in 1831 and was characterized by “individual effort.”<sup>26</sup> Publication of *The*