

the pain of the millennium

## charles taze russell and the jehovah's witnesses

1879-1916

edward h. abrahams

Like surging waves of the sea under a rising wind, sound  
the concerted mutterings of innumerable voices against the  
present social system.<sup>1</sup>

Charles Taze Russell, 1897

In 1879 Charles Taze Russell began publishing *Zion's Watch Tower* and founded a religious movement which came to be known as the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>2</sup> By 1974 over two million people belonged to the millenarian sect, 81,588 of whom lived in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In the 1870's, however, Russell was only one of many premillennialists who believed that Christ would soon return and announce the beginning of the millennium. That his movement should become one of America's major small sects testifies to Russell's ability both to deliver a message that many were eager to hear and to organize his devoted disciples into active missionaries.

Since Ira V. Brown published "Watchers For the Second Coming: The Millenarian Tradition in America"<sup>4</sup> in 1952, there has been a great deal of interest in millennial thought in the United States. Ernest Lee Tuveson in his outstanding and provocative book, *Redeemer Nation*,<sup>5</sup> believes that he has discovered a driving force of American history in the idea of America's millennial role. Ernest R. Sandeen, whose *Roots of Fundamentalism*<sup>6</sup> studies Protestant apocalyptic literature of the nineteenth century, also has found that millenarianism exercised a profound influence on the American imagination. Yet both books neglect to follow David E. Smith's recommendation in "Millennial Scholarship in America,"<sup>7</sup> a bibliographical essay he published in 1965, to place Charles Taze Russell and the Jehovah's Witnesses in their political and social setting. This is a gap the present essay hopes to fill.<sup>8</sup>

Charles Russell, the second son of Scotch-Irish parents, was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, on February 16, 1852. Little is known about his childhood except that when he was nine his mother died. According to an autobiographical statement published in *Zion's Watch Tower*, Russell wrote that he was "brought up a Presbyterian, and indoctrinated from the Catechism," but that at an early age he joined the Congregational Church and the Y.M.C.A.<sup>9</sup> His father owned a clothing store which, with his son's help, he expanded to a chain of stores in the Pittsburgh area. When the younger Russell decided to devote his life completely to religion, the stores were sold for a quarter of a million dollars and the money invested to support his ventures in publishing and proselytizing. At his death in 1916, however, the *Watch Tower* triumphantly noted that he left no estate "whatsoever" (*WT*, Dec. 1, 1916, 5998).

At the age of sixteen, Russell was confused and tormented by traditional Christian doctrine, particularly regarding hell. He wrote that he suffered an "utter shipwreck of faith" until he "stumbled upon Adventism" (*ZWT*, July 15, 1906, 3821). He probably did not have to search hard before he discovered ministers and tracts telling of the imminent end of the world. As Sandeen has noted, "during the last half of the nineteenth century there existed a millenarian movement within the United States which, though it gave itself no particular name . . . possessed a distinct identity and all the characteristics of a new sect."<sup>10</sup> In 1878, the year before Russell founded the Jehovah's Witnesses, one hundred twenty-two Protestant clergymen called for a conference of millenarians at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. At the convention they drafted the Niagara Creed in which they declared, "We believe that the world will not be converted during the present dispensation, but is fast ripening for judgement . . . and hence that Lord Jesus will come in person to introduce the millennial age . . . and that this personal and premillennial advent is the blessed hope set before us in the Gospel for which we should be constantly looking."<sup>11</sup> The largest number of ministers at Niagara came from the Presbyterian Seminary in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Russell's home town.<sup>12</sup>

Russell, however, did not cite the Niagara Creed or the Presbyterian clergy in Allegheny as an influence on his thought. Perhaps he was disappointed by the reluctance of the Protestant millenarians actually to name a date for the expected apocalypse. Since William Miller, a self-educated farmer from New York, unsuccessfully predicted Christ's return in 1843 and thereby disillusioned as many as fifty thousand believers, most dreamers of Armageddon were unwilling to predict a new date for the End of Days.<sup>13</sup> A generation later, however, some were more bold. According to Russell, he first "began to see that we were living somewhere near the close of the Gospel age" from Jonas Wendell, a preacher living in Pittsburgh (*ZWT*, July 15, 1906, 3821). As did many others in 1873, a depression year, Wendell and Russell expected the Second Advent or

millennium to begin in 1874. When that year passed as uneventfully as had 1843 many were disappointed, but Russell was not among them. With N. H. Barbour of Rochester, New York, he believed that Christ had in fact come but was invisible. The two men then became editors of *The Herald of the Morning*, a paper financed by Russell, in which they announced that the next four years were a “harvest age” and that Christ’s kingdom would be established in 1878. In 1879, however, Russell stated that Christ would not appear until 1914, in October on the Jewish Day of Atonement to be precise; Barbour, on the other hand, denounced the new prediction, and Russell founded his own paper, *Zion’s Watch Tower* in July 1879, to propagate his message. A monthly at fifty cents a year, it was available upon request to the “Lord’s poor.”

The few references to the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the literature of American religious history disagree on the political and social orientation of the sect. Stewart G. Cole, for example, thought that premillennialists in general were “ultra-conservative” and Sandeen concurred with him, on at least this point, exclaiming that “the nineteenth century millenarian was a political reactionary.” Tuveson, too, who went to great length to distinguish premillennialists, such as the Millerites and Russell’s followers, from “progressive-millennialists,” those who believe that the millennium will begin only *after* man has done God’s work, called the Witnesses “anti-progressive.” William G. McLoughlin, on the other hand, believed that they should be seen as “apolitical.”<sup>14</sup> At the other extreme, the Marxist historian E. J. Hobsbawm suggested that the Jehovah’s Witnesses might best be understood as revolutionaries; he called them and the other millenarian groups that he studied “primitive rebels.”<sup>15</sup> As is so often the case, however, none of these epithets describes the sect completely and accurately, for its political and social stance reflected all of these seemingly contradictory tendencies at the same time.

An analysis of Russell’s work—his *Studies in the Scriptures*, *Zion’s Watch Tower* from 1879 to 1916, and *Poems and Hymns of Dawn*—shows how, as pastor of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, he combined retreat, revolution, and reaction into a single world view. It is the thesis of this paper that the early Jehovah’s Witnesses founded a millennial movement in order to satisfy their political, social, and emotional needs. Against the background of an era of unprecedented change characterized by rapid industrialization, urban growth, and challenging new scientific and technological developments, the Witnesses told those who listened that their present trials would soon cease, that literally within a single day all the power and status that society had denied them would be theirs and theirs alone, and that if they would only believe in the power of God, they could live forever in millennial bliss. It is also apparent, based upon the limited evidence available, that it was in fact predominantly the rural poor who were attracted to the millenarian sect. Of course, Russell’s disciples comprised only a small minority of the poor, and the economic factor alone cannot account for the group’s appeal. Nevertheless, while

there may have been other motivations for joining the Jehovah's Witnesses it is clear that the economic and social dislocations suffered by numerous people during the Gilded Age led many to express their discontent within a religious framework.<sup>16</sup>

Social scientists throughout the twentieth century have been trying to explain the universal prevalence and appeal of millenarian movements. A brief review of their work, therefore, might be helpful in understanding Russell and the Jehovah's Witnesses. The first person in the United States to point out the social basis for sectarian crusades was H. Richard Niebuhr. Following the German sociologist Ernest Troeltsch, he wrote in his classic study, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, that the sects with their "marked propensity toward millenarianism" attracted mainly the "socially disinherited."<sup>17</sup> The anthropologist Bryan Wilson expanded Niebuhr's hypothesis by demonstrating how economic and social circumstances actually condition the growth of religious orders. Wilson thought that the rapidly changing modern industrial age was particularly conducive to spontaneous sectarian development because the independent sects fulfilled a need for the emotional expression of anger and resentment by society's outcasts.<sup>18</sup> He also noted how a charismatic leader, like Russell, in such conditions could articulate and determine the attitudes, doctrines, and organization of a religious movement.<sup>19</sup> Kenelm Burridge in his study of millenarian activities went even further than Wilson in correlating religion and social status. Basically, he postulated that all religions are concerned with organizing and manipulating power because all involve a redemptive process in which mankind seeks salvation.<sup>20</sup> An intense desire to be free from all obligations, arising from acute emotional tension, unfulfilled dreams, and general frustration, distinguishes the millenarian movement from other religious activities.<sup>21</sup> In an eloquent passage Burridge wrote, "The millennium points to a condition of being in which humans become free-movers, in which there are no obligations, in which all earthly desires are satisfied and therefore expunged. A new earth merges into the new heaven."<sup>22</sup> Or, as Mrs. C. T. Russell put it in 1890,

For the year before us, O! what rich supplies!  
For the poor and needy, living streams shall rise;  
For the sad and mournful, shall his grace abound;  
For the faint and feeble, perfect strength be found.  
Onward, then, fear not, children of the day;  
For his word shall never, never pass away.<sup>23</sup>

In the first issue of *Zion's Watch Tower* Russell outlined most of the doctrines and beliefs he held for the next thirty-seven years. "GOD IS LOVE," he began, and a God who is love would not allow suffering to continue without hope (*ZWT*, July 1879, 9). He believed that Christ died as a "ransom" for Adam's sin and that the ransom promised eternal life for all mankind including those long dead. In addition, he main-

tained that there was no hell (an idea he believed the Catholic Church created to raise money and to hold “her captives in the bondage of fear” [ZWT, Nov. 1883, 553]) but only a grave where the dead slept waiting for their resurrection. During the millennium, all would be given perfect health and at the end of the thousand-year reign the good would be rewarded with eternal life, while those who defied God’s will would die the Second Death,” his own theory for punishment of sin. The few “tested” before the millennium (i.e., Russell and his “little flock”) would perform a special function as mediators between the “Prince of Peace” and the multitudes. Russell, like most sectarians, claimed that his teachings were based upon a literal interpretation of the Bible and that he was not the founder of a new religion.

Although Russell rejected—and wrote fierce diatribes against—all the Protestant and Catholic denominations, he thought that the views of the Baptists were “as near the truth [as] any other sect of Babylon” (ZWT, March 1885, 790). His identification with them reveals the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ understanding of themselves in the world. Russell lamented the fact that today the Baptists wanted to develop as a sect, “that the pews and the treasuries may be full” but “two or three centuries ago,” he wrote, “when Baptists were only called such by their enemies, and when they called themselves simply Christians, their numbers were far less, but [then] they occupied a position in harmony with the days of the Apostles” (ZWT, March 1885, 790). It is significant that he thought that the seventeenth century Baptists were true Christians. According to Christopher Hill, during the English Revolution they wanted to turn the world upside down, a desire Russell identified with.<sup>24</sup> Like the seventeenth century millenarians, the Jehovah’s Witnesses also denied the existence of hell, felt keenly isolated in a changing society, and longed for the promised redemption.

Continually, Russell used the words “alienated,” “isolated,” and “troubled” to describe his congregations, which grew up spontaneously in response to *Zion’s Watch Tower*. When asked if the Witnesses should vote or hold public office he answered, “‘We are not of this world’—if our ‘citizenship is in heaven’ . . . then we are aliens, pilgrims, and strangers and not citizens of this country . . . The ‘little flock’ is so small and insignificant anyhow, that their votes would not turn the scale” (ZWT, Dec. 1882, 424). When asked, however, in 1902 if the consecrated should take advantage of the Bankruptcy Act for the Relief of Insolvent Debtors, Russell answered in the affirmative, indicating that some debtors and some faithful may have been the same people (ZWT, Feb. 15, 1902, 2961).

Russell’s millenarian outlook flowed from the social crises a rapidly industrializing nation experienced during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He was fond of quoting established statesmen to support his thesis that the world was about to end. For example, he cited Ben-

jamin Disraeli's remark to Parliament in 1874 "just in the beginning of this harvest period or judgement day": "The great crisis of the world is nearer than some suppose. Why is Christendom so menaced? I fear civilization is about to collapse (SS, Vol. IV, 113-114). Indeed, Russell felt that discontent had spread to every country, and, he noted, it was "frequently not without just cause" (ZWT, Feb. 1887, 899).

The primary reason for the world's strife according to Russell, lay in the split between capital and labor. Class distinctions, the accumulation of wealth, and general selfishness, he believed, were symptoms of the "Time of Trouble" which he said would precede the millennium. A sociologist might have called them symptoms of modernization. Russell complained that, while "giant corporations" closed the small shops and stores, and the declining price of agricultural produce crushed the "very life out of the farmers," the "upper crust" with their "fashionable weddings, balls and banquets" accumulated fantastic fortunes (SS, Vol. IV, 391, 294). What was it that "a self-respecting, intelligent citizen" wanted in this world?

It is not alms [Russell answered]; he has no desire to avail himself of the privileges of the poorhouse or when sick to become a charity patient in a hospital; but he does want a chance honestly and decently to earn his bread by the sweat of his face and with the dignity of an honest toiler to maintain his family. But, while he sees himself and his neighbor workman more dependent than ever upon favor and influence to get and keep a job of work, and the small shop keepers, small builders and small manufacturers struggling harder than ever for an honest living, he reads of the prosperity of the rich, the growing number of millionaires, the combines of capital to control the various industries—the copper business, the steel business, the match business, the paper business, the coal business, the paint business, the cutlery business, the telegraph business, and every other business (SS, Vol. IV, 292).

Russell may not have been a Populist, but to express the resentments of the Jehovah's Witnesses he knew how to employ their apocalyptic rhetoric.

Unlike the Populists, however, Russell was pessimistic about the possibility of reforming society through government. The union among money, politics, and religion, he thought, was too great for the poor and powerless to break. Nevertheless, he counseled hope and advised his readers to trust "God's plan." In an issue of *Zion's Watch Tower* in 1884, for example, he wrote that soon the Lord would destroy the "religious monopolies" as well as the "financial and political ones . . . Yes," he exclaimed, "all these fraudulent earthly systems, each claiming to be the true church, shall lose the honor and prestige they so much covet" (ZWT, June 1884, 621).

*Zion's Watch Tower* also interpreted the political events of the era

in terms of the unfolding drama of the end of days. The depression of 1893, for example, was one of a series of “waves” or “spasms” which would eventually lead to the ultimate destruction of the great monopolies (*SS*, Vol. IV, 284). The return of prosperity after 1898 the paper attributed to the influx of money from the Spanish-American War, noting capitalism’s dependence on war (*ZWT*, Sept. 15, 1901, 2897). Like Hobson, whom he did not cite but probably read, Russell suggested that the search for new markets abroad to meet the needs of the unemployed at home governed the developed nations’ foreign policies (*ZWT*, Sept. 1, 1901, 2867). The Jehovah’s Witnesses thought too that the greed and avarice of the “beastly” governments brought on the First World War, which they hoped would usher in the millennium (*WT*, Sept. 1, 1914, 5526-5527).

Russell, however, recoiled from the uses of power so that he could never quite bring himself to support (though one senses he would have liked to) the actual struggle of the oppressed. The Witnesses might sing

Jerichoes tremble and Sodoms consume,  
Kingdoms are tottering before the “Commune”;  
Davids, go forth with your sling stones of faith,  
Take ye the heads of the “giants of Gath.”<sup>25</sup>

But, for the most part, Russell advised his congregants to “seek meekness.”<sup>26</sup> “Not until the kingdom of God is established,” he wrote, “can the rights of men be properly adjusted” (*ZWT*, June 1882, 356). The only real hope for deliverance, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were told, lay in the millennium, when “the lives of multitudes will not then be sacrificed nor will the inequalities of society that now exist be perpetuated” (*SS*, Vol. IV, 149).

In spite of his reluctance to meddle in the affairs of this world or to place any faith in government, Russell did endorse a number of practical reforms. These included the remonetization of silver, the single tax, the imposition of an inheritance tax, and general land reform. While he did not believe that the Populist platform would alleviate the Witnesses’ plight (that would have to wait for the millennium), he clearly indicated where their sympathies lay. At times, he also considered more radical proposals popular before the turn of the century including anarchism, socialism, and nationalism.

Just as it was for many people living in the later part of the nineteenth century, so too it was difficult for Russell and his supporters to comprehend the impersonal economic forces so drastically affecting their lives. They therefore understood politics and economics in terms of conspiracy and plot, and the demonetization of silver in 1873 was high on their list of the causes of misfortune. “It was a masterstroke of selfish policy,” Russell wrote, “on the part of money-lenders [to] delude the poorer and less shrewd by calling gold ‘honest money’ and silver ‘dishonest money’ ” (*SS*, Vol. IV, 471-472). It was simply a case of New York financiers exploiting

the farmers and, to buttress his point, he quoted William Jennings Bryan (*ZWT*, Oct. 1, 1896, 2045). The Witnesses also sympathized with Henry George's proposal of a single tax on land to redistribute the nation's wealth. *Zion's Watch Tower* asked rhetorically in 1887, "Can one man rightfully hold thousands of acres more than he can or does use, while his brother who desires to use land can obtain none without paying a speculative price for it?" (*ZWT*, June 1887, 937). Because, Russell continued, Congress will not enact the single tax, "this like other safety-valves of legislative reform will be closed tight until finally the pent up force of the lower stratum of society will upheave and shatter the entire social structure in a reign of terror and anarchy . . . levelling all claims to land-ownership" (*ZWT*, June 1887, 938). As previously noted, the conspicuous consumption of the upper classes also irritated the Witnesses. Russell thought that a total inheritance tax on sums above one million dollars would help preserve competition, lighten the poor's burden, and prevent the accumulation of power within a few wealthy families (*ZWT*, Oct. 1890, 1244).

Nevertheless, Russell continued to refuse to support direct action. He warned against placing trust in labor unions and thought that anarchy, then a synonym for strike, was a sign of society's decay (*SS*, Vol. IV, 324, 481). *Zion's Watch Tower* joined the chorus of Christian papers which justified the execution of the Haymarket anarchists, although Russell noted that the four would get a second chance soon. Unlike most, however, the editor argued that the greatest "danger" to society did not come from "a small handful of anarchists" but from "friends of the law and order."<sup>27</sup> In socialism, on the other hand, Russell discovered many valuable ideals but, he claimed, at present they were impractical because of man's sinfulness (*ZWT*, Feb. 1, 1903, 3141). He also inveighed against joining utopian communities, exclaiming that they did not hold the "promises of Paradise" (*SS*, Vol. IV, 481). Turning his attention to nationalism through community planning, popularized in 1888 by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Russell also found much with which he was sympathetic. Nevertheless, he maintained again that the scientific organization of society would have to wait for supernatural intervention even though the nationalization of the railroads might prove feasible before the Advent (*SS*, Vol. IV, 490). One reader of *Zion's Watch Tower* wrote Bellamy that the only defect in *Looking Backward* was that it did not mention Christ's promise (*ZWT*, May 189, 1213).

Today the Jehovah's Witnesses are often associated with opposition to the theory of evolution. Evolution and higher criticism, however, did not become important focal issues in *Zion's Watch Tower* until the turn of the century and, when they did, they usually involved class conflict. In 1897, for example, Russell wrote

"The Great Reformation" is dead . . . Its great men—its Bishops, Doctors of Divinity, Theological Professors, and its most prominent and influential clergymen in the large

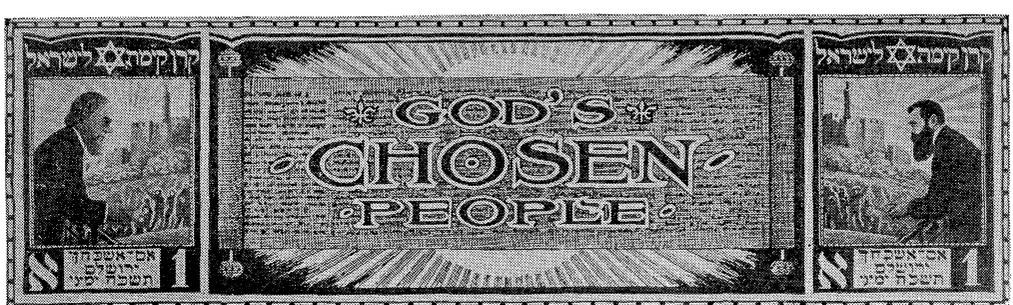
*cities*—are becoming the leaders into disguised infidelity. They seek to undermine and destroy the authority and inspiration of the sacred Scriptures, to supplant the plan of salvation therein revealed with the human theory of evolution (SS, Vol. IV, 161-162). [emphasis mine]

In 1904 a banner headline in *Zion's Watch Tower* read "COLLEGE EDUCATION IS ANTI-CHRISTIAN," and the implication of the article was clear: skepticism, evolution and wealth went together (ZWT, May 1, 1904, 3357). To counter the arguments of the higher critics, Russell cited the following incident:

Our wise men, anxious to disprove the Bible record of creation . . . were made to look very silly recently by an accident near East St. Louis. A car of lime and a car of potatoes were partly submerged together in the river. The slacking lime fired the car and the astonishing result was that every potato was turned to flinty stone in less than twenty-four hours. *The Lord's people have no need to feel ashamed of the old book* (ZWT, Feb. 1, 1904, 3312). [emphasis mine]

Nor of their own poverty and oppression, he might have added.

Zionism was another major theme in Russell's writings and thoughts. Indeed, the redemption of the Jews and their return to Palestine held great symbolic importance for the Jehovah's Witnesses. Russell believed that the Zionist movement was a divine sign of God's favor. *Zion's Watch Tower* followed Jewish current events closely, particularly those in the Holy Land, and the identification of the "Lord's poor" in the United States and the "Chosen People" was not lost to its readers. The cut below, equating Russell (on left) and Herzl (on right) with David's Citadel in Jerusalem in the background, Russell printed over a series of monthly columns he wrote for *Overland Monthly*, a West Coast travel journal. The Hebrew on the bottom translates: "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither."<sup>28</sup>



Russell equated Jewish emigration to Israel with the deliverance of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Like themselves, the Jew was an "outcast from God's favor" but, he promised, "he who scattered Israel will

gather them again.'"<sup>29</sup> Though Russell himself was not antisemitic, he thought antisemitism might help drive the Jews to Palestine. Even in New York, Russell lamented, Jews "may not be safe from accusations and persecutions leveled against them on account of race prejudices. Alas, poor Jews!"<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, he believed Zionism appealed mainly to "the poor, those not saturated with unbelief, Higher Criticism, [and] Evolution."<sup>31</sup> In 1892 he vividly described his visit to Jerusalem, revealing both his interest in lifting the downtrodden and his identification with Jewish trials:

We will go now to the Jew's "wailing place." . . . It is what is supposed to be a fragment of the Temple wall . . . Here Jews, both rich and poor (especially the latter) . . . are coming and going. Our hearts are touched, especially for the poorer classes of Jews who seem to be very sincere. We visit several of their synagogues on their Sabbath, and wish we had the knowledge of their language, which would enable us to tell them the tidings of great joy (*ZWT*, April 15, 1892, 1395).

From Jerusalem, Russell wrote letters to Barons Hirsch and Rothschild, proposing that they help create a new government in Palestine (*ZWT*, Dec. 1891, 1342-1343). It is significant that Russell's apocalypticism did not lead to antisemitism, as it did with many Populists, but to a degree of empathy with Jewish problems.

Russell was frequently asked where the money to support his voluminous publishing and extensive travels came from. "Among the interested [in the Jehovah's Witnesses, he answered] are not many rich, not many great, not many whom the world esteems wise, but chiefly the poor of this world" (*ZWT*, Jan. 1890, 1172). Letters to him subsequently published in *Zion's Watch Tower* substantiate his claim. Below are excerpts from some of the more dramatic examples.<sup>32</sup>

Caledonia, Miss.

I do wish that some good friend would pay for it for me [a subscription], as I am not able to at this time. I am a colored Congregational minister, and am anxious to know the truth of God's word, but I am too poor to purchase the Bible helps I need . . . I am forced to beg for them.

Kerrville, Texas

I am nearly seventy-eight years old, and have been in the service of the Lord for fifty years; and, through misfortunes, I am of the Lord's poor.

Delphi, N.Y.

Perhaps you would like to know who I am or what I am. I am over seventy years of age; what the world would call a poor man, a shoemaker, or rather a shoemender. But I bless God for his goodness to me.

Neosho Co., Kan.

I expect to return to my own nation in the near future (Cherokee Indians) and I will be more able to make the vision plain. I would send you pay for one or two years subscription . . . if I had it, but just now I am so pressed financially that I can scarcely keep my family.

Moultrie Co., S.C.

If I live until next September, I will be seventy-eight years old; . . . Please send me here some reading material for distribution. If I had a dollar in the world I would send it to you.

Joliet Prison, Ill.

Several other men besides myself and cell-mate are interested, and pretty much to the same extent.

Iowa

To one looking at me from outside only, I would seem to be a wanderer, having had little stability, having no fixed home since leaving the M.E. Church.

I have seven children, none of them yet self-supporting, and as my salary stopped when I stopped preaching for the people, I have had enough to do to feed and clothe them.

The seven letters quoted above all came from rural areas. Of eighty letters written to the editor between 1882 and 1890, thirty were from people living in places with populations of less than 7,000 and twenty-three less than 1,000. Only ten came from major American cities.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the "miracle wheat" (wheat promising a higher yield) and the free cotton seed which the *Watch Tower* advertised indicated that many of its readers must have been farmers (*WT*, Oct. 1, 1910, 4688; Mar. 1, 1915, 5649).

In 1879-1880, in response to sympathy with *Zion's Watch Tower*, thirty independent congregations, or "ecclesias" as they were called, were founded in the Middle West. The largest centered around Russell in Allegheny but there were others in Pennsylvania as well as in New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, Delaware, Ohio, and Michigan.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to trace the movement's growth; because the Jehovah's Witnesses kept no membership rolls, the only indicator of its spontaneous development is the reports to *Zion's Watch Tower* of the attendance at the annual Passover Memorial supper. These reports published yearly are incomplete and each used different criteria for measurement. Nevertheless, by 1899 the Jehovah's Witnesses had expanded to every part of the country and included some 2500 active members (*ZWT*, Apr. 15, 1889, 2457). Sixteen years later the world-wide sect counted at least 16,000 people in attendance at a Passover supper (*ZWT*, Apr. 15, 1915, 5675). Another indicator of the number of people who were interested in Russell's ideas is the number of subscriptions to *Zion's Watch Tower*, which grew from 6000 in 1879 to 45,000 in 1916. Millions of others were

also acquainted with his millenarian theology. Two thousand newspapers published Russell's Sunday sermons; between 1886 and 1916, he sold or gave away over six million copies of his *Studies in the Scriptures*;<sup>35</sup> and in 1914 nine million people were said to have seen his film *Photo-Drama of Creation* (*WT*, Dec. 1, 1916, 5998).

In their vision of paradise, the Manuels have written, men disclose their innermost desires.<sup>36</sup> The Jehovah's Witnesses also reveal much about their motivations, character, and understanding of society in their millennial dream.

Basically, Russell believed that the conflicting social forces of the age in which he lived were certain to lead to anarchy which, in turn, would convince mankind, as he wrote, to "gladly welcome and bow before the heavenly authority, and recognize its strong and just government."<sup>37</sup> Therein he promised "no more death, neither sorrow nor crying [nor] any more pain"<sup>38</sup> but, he said, the new order would also be characterized by "an iron rule."<sup>39</sup> After 1914 the world would be divided into two classes: the "kingdom class" or the elect to whom God had revealed his secret and mystery and the multitudes. "God's agents," as Russell called himself and his followers, would perform a special function during the millennium as "spiritual instructors." Harsh taskmasters, they would employ force to ensure obedience, and those who wilfully defied the divine will they would cut off from eternal life by instant electrocution.<sup>40</sup> The Jehovah's Witnesses' millennial dream in action was, therefore, something less than utopian, but it does point out that what the group desired more than anything else was power and its accompanying prestige.

In 1909 Russell transferred the Jehovah's Witnesses' headquarters from Allegheny to Brooklyn. It was perhaps symbolic of the movement's greatest aspiration (and like their view of the millennium tells us much about them) that they in fact moved from an old four-story office-building outside Pittsburgh to the Plymouth Church and fashionable Brooklyn Heights parsonage of Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher, of course, had been a pillar of the conservative religious establishment, and, according to his latest biographer, "the philosopher of a new leisure class,"<sup>41</sup> or, in other words, the epitome of everything Russell and the Jehovah's Witnesses opposed. The irony was not lost to the purchaser. "It certainly seems very remarkable," Russell wrote, "that we should get the old Beecher Bethel and then by accident get his former residence" (*WT*, Mar. 1, 1909, 4342). It was indeed remarkable that a group of thirty men should take Beecher's distinguished brownstone mansion at 124 Columbia Heights as their new home looking out, as it did, across the East River at New York's financial district. The official history of the Jehovah's Witnesses noted, "Pastor Russell took Beecher's old study for his own," and the Plymouth Church, they renamed, the "People's Pulpit."<sup>42</sup> In the paradox of a religious movement representing the disinherited poor, drawing the bulk of its support from rural America, moving not only a stone's throw from

Wall Steet, but to the home of the mid-nineteenth's century leading minister, lies the meaning of Charles Taze Russell's crusade.

Russell's and the Jehovah's Witnesses' millenarian hopes reflected one theme: their extreme alienation within American society. Their vision of a new heaven and a new earth reversed the crushing burden of being on the bottom of the status hierarchy. It gave ultimate power to the powerless. It busted the economic, political and religious trusts. And most important it gave the "little flock" the strength to endure their present difficult lives. It was, in the last analysis though, a vehement, but pathetic, protest against the inexorable, unyielding social and economic changes it was their misfortune to experience. It was, as Kenelm Burridge wrote, "the pain of the millennium."<sup>43</sup>

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### footnotes

1. Charles Taze Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures* (hereafter referred to as *SS* by parenthetical references in text), 6 vols. (Allegheny, Pa., Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1886-1904), Vol. IV, 96-97. Volume IV came out in 1897, originally entitled *The Day of Vengeance*, but Russell changed the title to *The Battle of Armageddon* when people mistook the book for a novel.

2. Although it was not until 1931 that the sect Russell founded called themselves Jehovah's Witnesses, for purposes of clarity I will use that name in this paper. Russell throughout his life resisted labeling his congregants at all, believing that they were the only true Christians. Sometimes they were referred to, however, as "Bible Students" or "Millennial Dawners."

3. *1975 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witness* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1974), 257.

4. "Watchers for the Second Coming: The Millenarian Tradition in America," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXIX, 3 (December, 1952), 441-458.

5. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation* (Chicago, 1968).

6. (Chicago, 1970.)

7. *American Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Fall 1965), 535-549.

8. There are several histories of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but most are written from a denominational viewpoint and are therefore of limited value. Alan Rogerson's *Millions Now Living Shall Never Die* (London, 1969) is the best book in this series, providing a brief biography of Russell's life as well as an outline of his basic beliefs.

9. *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, July 15, 1906, 3821. Hereafter referred to as *ZWT*; in 1909, its title became *The Watch Tower*, here *WT*. Subsequent references will be identified by parenthetical notes in the text.

10. Sandeen, xv.

11. *Ibid.*, 276-277.

12. *Ibid.*, 167.

13. Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects in America* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 35. Sandeen, 150. A few diehard millenarians refused to believe that they had misplaced their trust in Miller. Millerites such as Mrs. Ellen G. White, who founded the Seventh Day Adventists in the aftermath of the disappointment of 1843, continued to proselytize and to predict new dates for Christ's arrival. Leon Festinger's work on the social psychology of true believers helps us understand their behavior as well as the continued fanaticism of the later Jehovah's Witnesses. He notes that if "an individual believes something with his whole heart . . . has a commitment to this belief . . . has taken irrevocable actions because of it [and] is presented with unequivocal and undeniable evidence that his belief is wrong . . . the individual will emerge not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view." In order to relieve the "cognitive dissonance" between the person's belief and experience, Festinger explains, the individual will often not change his opinions but seek support for them from others to prove he was right all along (Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails* [Minneapolis, 1956], 3, 28).

14. Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (Hampden: Archon Books, 1963), 39-40; Sandeen, 41; Tuveson, 34; McLoughlin, "Is There a Third Force in Christendom?" *Daedalus*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Winter 1967), 50, 55.

15. *Primitive Rebels* (New York, 1959), 63, 72-73. In Italy Hobsbawm found Jehovah's

Witnesses were elected secretaries of local Communist Party branches.

16. Gary Schwartz points out that as yet we do not have the theoretical framework in which to understand why some people choose secular, and others, religious solutions to resolve their problems (Gary Schwartz, *Sect, Ideologies and Social Status* [Chicago, 1970], 42). It seems likely, however, that personal predisposition resulting from family and educational background would influence the decision. It also should be noted that the religious and secular worlds are not mutually exclusive. At least, one member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, also belonged to the Farmers Alliance (*ZWT*, Nov. 1891, 1337).

17. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland, 1964), 30-31.

18. Bryan Wilson, *Sects and Society* (Berkeley, 1961), 8.

19. *Ibid.*, 10.

20. Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth* (New York, 1969), 5.

21. Norman Cohen, "Medieval Millenarism: Its Bearing on the Comparative Study of Millenarian Movements," in *Millennial Dreams in Action*, Sylvia L. Thrupp, ed. (New York, 1970), 42.

22. Burridge, 165.

23. Charles Taze Russell, *Poems and Hymns of Dawn* (Allegheny, Pa.: Tower Publishing Company, 1890), 183.

24. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York, 1972), *passim*.

25. *Poems and Hymns of Dawn*, 164.

26. *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 55 (Second Series, 1910), 626.

27. *ZWT*, Dec. 1887, p. 991. For a discussion of the reaction of the Christian press to Haymarket, see Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York, 1967).

28. *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 55 (Second Series, 1910), 622.

29. *Ibid.*, 418.

30. *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 56 (Second Series, 1910), 526.

31. *Ibid.*, 526-527.

32. *ZWT*, issues for May 1882, 346; July 1883, 500; Aug. 1883, 515; Oct. 1885, 768; Aug. 1887, 966; March 1888, 1013; Aug. 1890, 1237.

33. Letters published in *Zion's Watch Tower* each in some way indicated positive identification with the sect. Although I counted over one hundred letters, I could only identify accurately where eighty came from since many simply signed the name of their state. Most of those, however, were from rural areas of the country. In addition, there is no way of knowing if a letter signed "Chicago" was not from a recent migrant.

34. *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1959), 23.

35. *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 1916, 11.

36. Frank E. and Fritzie P. Manuel, "Sketch for a Natural History of Paradise," *Daedalus*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Winter 1972), 83.

37. Charles Taze Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, Vol. I (Allegheny, Pa.: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1905), 266.

38. *Ibid.*, 73.

39. *Ibid.*, 302.

40. *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 57 (Second Series, 1911), 339.

41. William G. McLoughlin, *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York, 1970), 111.

42. *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose*, 47.

43. Burridge, 3.