



### **Jane Marsh Parker (1836-1913)**

Jenny Marsh was a girl of eight when she arrived here with her family. Her father was a preacher, and both parents were converts to the Millerite movement. Followers of William Miller believed in an imminent and definite date for the Second Coming of Christ and the world's end. When the doomsday failed to arrive after several official postponements in 1843 and 1844, Millerism was widely scorned.

This experience with religious extravagance exerted a life-long influence on Jane Parker. She was conservative in many of her personal beliefs. She grew up to be a successful and widely-read freelance journalist and fiction writer. Her novel, *The Midnight Cry* (1886), depicted upstate New York in the time of religious enthusiasms. Her book on Rochester, *Rochester, A Story Historical* (1884), was a literate and readable contribution to the city's Semi-Centennial.

With Dr. Sarah Dolley she founded the women's Ignorance Club in 1881. She also became an ardent anti-suffragist in the 1890s, despite her high regard for Susan B. Anthony and other women's rights leaders.

Jane (Marsh) Parker (1836-1913) not only transcended the traumatic religious influences of her childhood to build a mature faith, she also made the fanaticism she experienced feed her creativity as a writer. When she was seven years old, her parents became converts of William Miller, who preached that the world would come to an end on October 22, 1844. Early that year Joseph Marsh, an itinerant evangelist, moved his family to Rochester to edit publications of the movement. Awaiting the Day of Wrath, many of Miller's 100,000 followers sold homes, farms and businesses.

It was a frightening life for a sensitive eight-year-old child. With Judgment Day expected so soon, Jane and her two sisters were not sent to school. They spent their days at meetings, assailed with threats of the horrible fate of all but True Believers. While the faithful were soon to "go up gloriously," lightning would turn to ashes all other life on earth. The picture of her neighbors pleading for their lives, and the concept of a vicious Jehovah became hideously vivid in Jane's active imagination. When the fateful day passed as usual, the Millerites were ridiculed, and Jane later wrote of "the lifetime scar" made by the taunt of other children, "Hi there, Millerite! When are you going up?"

After attending several other schools, Jennie, as her family called her, studied at Dr. Chester Dewey's Collegiate Institute, then at the Clover Street Seminary and finally at the schools of Professors Wetherill and M. G. Peck. When Frederick Douglass moved next door to the Marshes in 1847, Jane began a lifelong friendship with the family and a concern for the rights of Negroes. At this time, after having turned away from all religion, she joined the Episcopal church, an allegiance which would be a major theme of her life.

Jennie's parents had maintained their faith in an imminent Second Coming of Christ and





made her memorize texts fired with end-of-the-world imagery. Paradoxically, this stimulated her imagination so that, as she later wrote, "I knew what the birds were singing; what the thunder was growling and groaning; and could see the big black log out in the burned-over clearing twist and squirm like a dragon." Her writing career began when she was sixteen with the publication of poems in the *Expositor*, the magazine her father edited. The next year she had a poem and seven short stories published in *Waverly Magazine* and, in the next several years, fifty poems in *Moore's Rural New Yorker*. Her first novel, *Toiling and Hoping, or The Story of a Little Hunchback*, appeared in 1856. These early efforts she later disclaimed as superficial and sentimental.

With marriage to George T. Parker, a Rochester lawyer, and the birth of four children, Jane's life centered around her home. Fortunately, writing, together with teaching and art, was then considered a "female profession" and could be fitted in between domestic chores (though not always easily). Church and family were her themes, as when she helped found the magazine, *The Young Christian Soldier*, and wrote articles for numerous Episcopal Church periodicals as well as a series of Sunday School books. In 1860, a secular publisher brought out her novel, *Barley Wood: or Building on the Rock*. This story of a Presbyterian girl's conversion to the Episcopal church was, as she stated, an attempt "to defend the essential points in our faith [rather than] to attack, with sectarian bitterness, creeds dissenting from our own." Didactic as it was, it had a lively plot and sensitive characterization. For her writings about church teaching, Mrs. Parker read much philosophy and theology, studies which led her to question received dogma and forge a deeply ingrained personal faith.

Her church work leading to social concerns in the early 1870's, Mrs. Parker wrote a series of fourteen articles titled "Our Poor" for the *Rochester Post Express*. Her views on public charity and treatment of prisoners were well ahead of her time. For the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, she wrote a generally favorable report of a woman's suffrage convention and supported her friend, Susan B. Anthony, in her attempt to vote. She distanced herself, however, from the more blatantly aggressive reformers, for instance, referring to Dr. Mary Walker's "frightful costume, which can come under no head we know of, being neither masculine, feminine, nor neuter."

Mr. Parker's work next moved the family to New Albany, Indiana. Through articles sent to the *Rochester Express*, Jane's friends learned of her disapproval of the "Southwest," from its climate and coal smoke to the inhabitants' rustic manners. When the Parkers returned to Rochester three years later, Jane was eager to devote her intellect and energy to civic activities.

In 1881, with Dr. Sarah R. (Adams) Dolley, she organized the Ignorance Club, the city's first women's club. Composed of doctors, social workers, writers and artists, this discussion group became a major cultural force in the city. For one who had little of the reformer's zeal, who usually took a middle-of-the-road position, this required some assertiveness. As she later wrote, "The woman ...who let it be known that she 'belonged'





to a woman's club was looked upon as in sympathy with all that was revolutionary and atheistically. She had enlisted under a banner steadily moving forward to assail and overthrow home life, the marriage tie, and the teachings of St. Paul." In these years she also worked for the Red Cross and the State Industrial School.

Seeing Rochester anew also sent Mrs. Parker to studying its history, and, for the city's semi centennial in 1884, she wrote the substantial and readable Rochester, A Story Historical. To precede publication of a Rochester history by a Syracuse publisher, she completed it in less than four months, a remarkable feat. This she followed with newspaper and magazine articles on Jesuit missionaries in Western New York, Genesee Valley Indian chiefs, Masonic rites related to the murder of William Morgan and a book-length biography of Samuel Morse including the development of the telegraph by Rochester's Hiram Sibley. A founder of the Rochester Historical Society, she long served as its corresponding secretary.

In the same years she wrote scholarly articles on church history, discussions of religious education and stories for young church people as well as a paper on Negro-White social relations read before the Association for the Advancement of Women.

When she was in her forties and fifties, Mrs. Parker turned back to her childhood to create from her suffering her most important writing. "The Housewarming at Larchdale" tells the experiences of a young girl involved in anticipation of the Second Coming, vividly describing her belief and disbelief, fear and confusion. According to the author's biographer, Marcelle Lane, it is the author's finest work of fiction. Millerism is also the subject of the novel, *The Midnight Cry*, which, with its complex and implausible plot, must be judged second-rate. The same theme is treated in "The Mistakes of a Prophet," which appeared in the *New York Evening Post* and "A Little Millerite" in *Century Magazine*.

Popular and entertaining as they were, these writings were by no means superficial. Mrs. Parker's knowledge of theology enabled her to understand Millerism as an extreme form of early Protestant orthodoxy; she protested its too-literal interpretation of Bible passages, unchecked individualism and its teaching of a wrathful and unforgiving God. At the same time, she could "baptize," so to speak, her own past, writing, "The children of Millerites are indebted to their early experience for a quickening of their inner life, which forced and unnatural as it was, proved their future salvation from formal acceptance of religious teaching without question or doubt."

In 1889, Frederick Douglass, appointed United States Minister to Haiti and Resident Consul General, invited Jane to sail with him and a party of eight to the island. In a three-month stay there, she studied Haitian history, social conditions, race and class distinctions, the position of women and Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary work--all to be topics of later published pieces.

In the 1890's Mrs. Parker began frequently expressing in print her views as a "non-





suffragist." She has since been widely termed as an out-and-out opponent of women's rights, but this oversimplifies her position. Besides paying tribute to Susan B. Anthony at a banquet in her honor, she wrote of her increased respect for all leaders of the movement. She disagreed with their anti-male rhetoric and their expectation that women's voting would insure good government. Objecting chiefly to the suffragists' methods, she actively opposed their campaign for signatures to a petition to the State Assembly. Here she seems to have been ruled by concern for proper social form, even by a touch of snobbery, as when she wrote of her group, "We made no house-to-house solicitation. We gave out a few copies of the protest, and the ladies who took them secured names in their parlors in a quiet way. We did not seek quantity as much as quality."

After her husband's death in 1895, Jane Parker lived with a son and her daughter in Milwaukee and Detroit, returning to Rochester in the summers, and staying for one year to write *Christ Church, a Story Chronological 1855--1901*. Besides writing a great many poems and articles on a wide variety of subjects, she returned in "A Fanatic and Her Mission," published in *The Churchman*, to depicting a person who accepts "every insignificant coincidence as psychic confirmation of the Lord's especial alignment with her project." Living in California with her daughter, she kept at work, her writing ranging from gentle satire to a thoughtful analysis of millennialism.

Mrs. Lane has commented on Jane Parker's undeserved obscurity as a writer, saying that in her work about Millerism "she touched upon a native strain which, had she pursued it faithfully, probably would have resulted in her development into a much larger figure in American letters." Mrs. Parker, she says, was partly prevented from fulfilling her potential by her preoccupation with family, church, civic and club interests. This is true, but these varied interests helped make this woman a warmly human and interesting person.

### Resources

Lane, Marcelle LeMenager, *The Life and Work of Jane Marsh Parker 1836-1913*

