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*The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* J .F. C.  
Harrison

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**HARRISON, J. F. C.** *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979. 277 pp. \$21.00.

Reviewed by Malcolm R. Thorp, associate professor of history, Brigham Young University.

Professor John F. C. Harrison of the University of Sussex (England) is one of the most respected authorities of early nineteenth-century English social history. His most recent book, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850*, providing a detailed and sympathetic account of a rather neglected period of millenarian enthusiasm, is an important contribution to our understanding of England and America during this time. Writing in a narrative rich with human interest, Harrison explores the careers of the various major and minor popular prophets of the period. Mormons will find interest in his attempts to compare the English experience with the American, particularly with Mormonism.

On the surface, the millenarian craze might appear to be nothing more than madness, perhaps the product of the "lunatic fringe" of society. The problem with such simplistic analysis is that everywhere one might turn in the early nineteenth-century sources millenarianism is likely to crop up. It was part of the mental framework of the age, and, as Harrison shows, it was from some solid citizenry that the various prophets gained their following. Not only were working-class disciples a major component of these movements, but the followers also included artisans, lower middle-class shopkeepers, and even a few proper bourgeois people. Harrison attempts to explain why everyday, "ordinary" people came to believe in the revelations of

such diviners as Joanna Southcott, Richard Brothers, John Wroe, and Zion Ward (to name only the more prominent).

Joanna Southcott's career as a prophetess was the most fascinating of all. She was a simple but sincere Devonshire country woman who used her revelatory powers in sealing her devout followers as "Joint-Heirs" with Christ. Presumably, this sealing gave the elect special magical powers against the buffetings of Satan. Then, at the age of sixty-five, this spinster became convinced she was to be the mother of "Shiloh" (see Genesis 49:10), who was to be the promised Saviour who would usher in the Millennium. Even when Joanna's "pregnancy" ended in false labor pains rather than the birth of Shiloh, many of her followers remained optimistic, although Joanna died shortly afterwards, deeply disappointed because of what was not to be.

Less dramatic, but of real significance, was the brief career of Richard Brothers, a former naval officer. In the early 1790s, he reached the low ebb of personal misfortune. Plagued by financial problems, his wife's infidelity, and mental illness, Richard Brothers was on the verge of emigration when he discovered his prophetic mission. He came to believe he was chosen by God to lead the return of the Jews to the Holy Land and undertake the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Although he was committed in 1795 to an asylum as insane, he continued to exercise considerable influence.

One can see a direct connection between Brothers's prophecies and those of John Wroe. A poor Lancashire woolcomber, John Wroe said he had experienced a series of divine communications between 1822 and 1832. He was told it was a calling to lead both the visible and the invisible Hebrews: "That they shall be circumcised both in heart and flesh." Such teachings attracted a following at Ashton-under-Lyne and Bradford, although Wroe's credibility seems to have declined as his passions mounted for seven young virgins.

Perhaps of more significance was the prophet John (Zion) Ward, whose message reminds us of the antinomianism of the seventeenth-century Ranter movement. Like the Ranters, John Ward taught that Christ was essentially within the true believer, although he went beyond Ranterism, claiming to be not only Shiloh, but also God and Christ and Satan!

Harrison explains the popular obsession between 1780 and 1850 with the Second Coming as a response to the crises of profound social and economic change. "Living in such a time of acute social change was for many people uncomfortable, bewildering, traumatic. Familiar social landmarks disappeared, assumptions about stability and

normality were no longer unquestioned, the sources of authority to which men looked for guidance were not convincing as they once had been" (p. 219). In addition to a "general crisis," Harrison argues that there is much evidence for personal anxiety and insecurity related to the stresses and strains of the time. In other words, millenarian imagery was an important ingredient in the heritage of popular culture, and, in time of crisis, the belief helped some people cope with reality. To the millenarian, however, social change was not necessarily an evil, but part of the inevitable process of change that would lead to the creation of a better world. Unfortunately, the millenarian outlook also led to extremism, as in May 1838 when the prophet John Nicholas Tom led his followers against the local Kentish magistrates. The ensuing battle left eleven people killed (including Tom) and seven others wounded—a grim reminder of fanatical excesses that are related historically to the pursuit of the Millennium.

Of special interest to LDS readers is the chapter on "Peculiar Peoples," which discusses American denominations, including the Mormons. While some might be offended by the comparative treatment of Mormonism with the Shakers, Millerites, and other sects, most readers will find the study to be both dispassionate and fair. More problematical, however, is Harrison's assertion that Mormonism does not fit neatly into a premillenarian category, that there were postmillenarian overtones to Mormon thought. Taking the corpus of Joseph Smith's teachings on the Second Coming, it is hard to see how the prophecies can be interpreted as suggesting any sort of moral self-improvement of society. Section 87 of the Doctrine and Covenants sees a premillennial holocaust arising from the sectional strife between the North and South. As wars and rumors of wars filled the face of the earth, it was asserted that only the Saints' political kingdom would survive these calamities. Indeed, there is the stern warning that the kingdom of the devil, which will be built among the children of mankind, will be consumed as stubble. While these prophecies are typical of the premillenarian outlook, the political overtones appear to be distinctly different from the other sectarian ideologies discussed in this insightful book.