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Author(s): Kevin Enns-Rempel

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Jane Marsh Parker & "The Mennonite in Southern California"



by Kevin Enns-Rempel

In September 1911 an unusual article appeared in the journal *Overland Monthly*. Entitled "The Mennonite in Southern California," it was written by Jane Marsh Parker, and contained her impressions of the Mennonite community at Escondido in San Diego County. The article, though it offers little in the way of useful information about Mennonites themselves, provides a fascinating glimpse of how an outsider representing "mainstream" American culture of the early twentieth century viewed these "peculiar people."

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Jane Marsh Parker (1836-1913) was a journalist and prolific author of short stories, poetry, and novels, as well as a social reformer and participant in various civic movements. Little of her writing is remembered today, and even her biographer admits that "none of it may be of permanent literary value."¹ Nonetheless, she was a regular contributor to such publications as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers's*, *The Outlook*, *Century Magazine* and *The Home Journal*, in addition to various newspapers and religious publications. In these contexts she left behind a voluminous

body of writing on a diverse range of topics, including religious studies, politics, women's rights, race relations, local history and travelogues. Parker's 1911 article in *Overland Monthly* apparently is the only time she turned her attention to Mennonites.

Parker was born Permelia Jenny Marsh on 16 June 1836 in Milan, New York, to Joseph and Sarah (Adams) Marsh. Her father was a deeply religious man, who held beliefs that many others of his time would have considered extreme. In this light, Marcelle Lane suggests that "Mrs. Parker's child-



At left: Members of the Bethania Mennonite Brethren Church (Escondido) in front of their meeting house, date unknown. (Photo courtesy of Evangeline Kroeker.) Above: Jane Marsh Parker (1836-1913)—author, journalist, and social reformer. Parker wrote many articles on a range of topics, but the only time she wrote about Mennonites was a 1911 article on the people of the Bethania M.B. congregation in Escondido, California.

hood is a story of exposure to religious fanaticism that conditioned her entire life and thought."² Joseph Marsh was one of the early converts from Methodism to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 1843 he became a follower of William Miller, a Baptist lay preacher who predicted the imminent second coming of Christ. Marsh left the Christian Church in 1844 and moved to Rochester, New York, where he headed the "western center" of the Millerite movement while editing its weekly journal and other publications.

The Marsh family lived under Joseph's firm belief regarding

Christ's imminent return. Their house in Rochester was rented for the period specified by Mr. Marsh as "until the Lord comes," and contained more prophetic charts than furniture. Jenny Marsh and her sisters were kept home from school, since such activities were deemed unnecessary on the eve of Christ's return. She remembered this as a terrifying time of anticipating "that fearful upheaval of the earth, that fiery rending apart of the heavens ... the indescribable confusion of angelic trumpets, and the shrieking of the damned," in which "God himself would descend with a great shout to burn up the world, the sea, and the dry land."³

When Christ did not return according to Miller's timetable, many of his followers abandoned the movement. Joseph Marsh, however, maintained his faith in the imminent second coming to the end of his life. The family remained in Rochester after the Millerite movement collapsed, and Joseph worked as an itinerant

"The Marsh home served as a stop on the Underground Railroad."

minister and publisher of millenarian literature. He also became part of the abolitionist movement, speaking widely against the evils of slavery. The Marsh family lived next door to the former slave and renowned abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had moved to Rochester in 1847. The Marsh home served as a stop on the Underground Railroad, and Parker early developed a strong commitment to racial justice in that context. While she internalized her father's abolitionist ideals, Parker resisted his religiosity

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and retreated for awhile to "the Sahara of skepticism."⁴ This alternative proved unsatisfactory, and she eventually became a member of the Episcopal church while still a teenager.

It was at this time that Parker began her life as a writer. She published her first poems and short stories in 1854 in various magazines, and her first novel, *Toiling and Hoping*, or *The Story of a Little Hunchback* (New York: Derby & Jackson) appeared in 1856. The novel, no copies of which are known to exist today, received mixed critical reactions. Even her biographer called it a "lugubrious melodrama" that "elicits a snicker from the reader of today."⁵

In the same year that her first novel was published Jane married George Tann Parker, a Rochester attorney. For the first decade after her marriage, Parker's writing was limited largely to churchly publications while she raised their three young children. Her only novel of this time, *Barley Wood*; or *Building on the Rock* (New York: D. Dana, 1860), was the story of a girl's conversion from the Presbyterian to Episcopal church. It has been characterized as little more than "church propaganda."⁶

In 1871 Parker began to expand her intellectual horizons, reading widely in philosophy and "higher criticism." Her religious commitments diminished, though she never entirely rejected them. Social service and activism instead became the central focus of Parker's life. In 1881 she founded the "Fortnightly Ignorance Club," a women's society in Rochester. She

was also actively involved in the women's movement and counted Susan B. Anthony among her close personal friends. Oddly, however, Parker remained a staunch opponent of women's suffrage throughout her entire life.

During this same time Parker finally took up in her writing the topic of the Millerite movement, and it was on this subject that she produced some of her strongest work. The history of Millerism became the topic for one novel (*The Midnight Cry*⁷), works of short fic-

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tion, historical essays⁸ and autobiography.⁹ There can be little doubt that Parker's strong reactions against her religious upbringing, as revealed in her writings of this time, colored her impressions when she would turn to the subject of Mennonites late in her life.

When her husband died in 1895, Parker left Rochester in search of other employment and residential opportunities. She worked for a time in Cleveland and then at the state library in Madison, Wisconsin. She lived briefly in Holly, New York, and Detroit before returning for a short time to Rochester in 1904. The following year Parker fol-

lowed her daughter Margaret to Escondido, California. In California, Parker kept up her writing, contributing articles on California history and culture to various national publications. It was in this context that she published her article, "The Mennonite in Southern California" in 1911. Shortly after the publication of that article, Parker moved to Los Angeles, where she died on 13 March 1913.

Turning now to Parker's observations on the Mennonites, it seems evident that her impressions are shaped both by her own religious upbringing as well as prevailing early-twentieth-century attitudes toward immigrant groups and assimilation. While Parker is generally sympathetic to the Mennonites, she clearly objects to their unwillingness to acculturate into American society. The worst thing she can say about them is that they are "separatists" and "therein lies their objectionable feature as fellow-citizens."

Parker's occasional references to the novel, *Tillie: A Mennonite Maid*, by Helen R. Martin (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1904) may also be understood in this light. In Martin's novel, Tillie is a young Mennonite woman who chafes against the restrictions and narrow-mindedness of her religious community, and eventually chooses to leave it. Parker's assertion that "little Mennonite girls" would do well to read Martin's novel reflects her belief that religious beliefs running counter to American society represented shackles to be thrown off. In terms of reading material that Menno-

"Parker seems to want it both ways—to have Mennonites shed their distinctive habits but still maintain the moral virtues that she prized."

nites did accept, Parker saw in their almanacs (probably a reference to the *Family Almanac* and *Familien-Kalendar* published by the Mennonite Publishing House in Elkhart, Ind., and later Scottsdale, Pa.) merely an effort to keep alive memories of separatism and martyrdom "better forgotten" in the context of a "new" and "happier dispensation."

All of these comments are consistent with the prevailing belief of Progressive-era America, which demanded without apology that immigrants and religious separatists give up their "backward" traditions in favor of more advanced and forward-thinking American ways. Celebration—or even tolerance—of multiculturalism played no part in most Americans' thinking during this time, and Parker's article clearly exemplifies this. Though she bears the Mennonites no ill will, she seems utterly confident that they will best be served by shedding their "peculiar" ways

Endnotes

¹Marcelle LeMénager Lane, *The Life and Work of Jane Marsh Parker*. The Rochester Historical Society Publications, no. 23 (Rochester: Rochester Historical Society, 1946), 2.
²Lane, 3.

³Quoted in Lane, 7.

⁴Jane Marsh Parker, "Saying Prayers," *The Outlook* (Sep. 1906).

⁵Lane, 20.

⁶Lane, 26.

⁷(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1886).

⁸Including "The Mistakes of a Prophet,"

The New York Evening Post (4 Sep. 1886).

⁹"A Little Millerite," *Century Magazine* (Dec. 1886).

¹⁰J. R. Nourse, "Simple Farmers Given Fake Deeds to Lerdo Lands," *The Los Angeles Examiner* (10 March 1910).

and adapting to American culture as soon as possible.

And yet Parker shows some ambivalence in this regard as well. While on the one hand she assumes that Mennonite peculiarity will—and should—disappear, she also applauds them for serving as “a breakwater ... against the incoming tide of foreign immigration threatening to sweep away what is left of the Christian Sabbath in California,” a trend also encouraged by the growth of tourism in the state. Parker seems to overlook the fact that if the Mennonites were to acculturate as she hoped, they would probably no longer serve so well as “the counteracting influence to the Sabbath breaking tourist, as well as the foreign alien from Southern Europe and Asia.” Parker seems to want it both ways—to have Mennonites

“Parker’s grip on the details of the Mennonite story in California is tenuous.”

shed their distinctive habits but still maintain the moral virtues that she prized.

Parker’s concern for women’s rights is also evident in the article. She comments critically on the “master and slave” relations between Mennonite men and women, and seems more concerned that “the present dispensation of the female Mennonite would speedily disappear” than that the same would happen for young Mennonite men. Parker’s seemingly critical comment that “votes for women will never find a following” among Mennonite women, however, is difficult to interpret in light of the fact that she op-

posed women’s suffrage throughout her entire life.

Finally, Parker’s aversion to millenarian thinking can be detected in her comments toward the end of the article about the Mennonite Brethren who went to Jerusalem to greet Christ’s Second Coming but were then “fleece” while there. While Parker is not overtly critical of these “zealots,” that she would point out how they came to misfortune while waiting for Christ’s return seems telling in light of her own childhood memories.

Parker’s grip on the details of the Mennonite story in California is tenuous. She mentions in her opening paragraph that “the Mennonite emigration to Southern California ... has been going on now for some five years,” when in fact it had been occurring for over twenty years by 1911. Mennonites had first begun arriving in the Upland area in the late 1880s, in Paso Robles by 1896, and the greater Los Angeles area by the late 1890s. Parker is apparently unaware of these other Mennonite communities, though she did know of the misfortunes that had fallen upon the settlers at Martensdale (which she erroneously calls both “Martinsdale” and “Martinsville”). This is not entirely surprising, since the demise of Martensdale in early 1910 had been prominently covered in the California press, including a front-page article in *The Los Angeles Examiner*.¹⁰ Parker’s knowledge of the Mennonites in California seems limited to those people who lived in her own community and the ones she could read about in the newspapers.

At the time Parker wrote her article there was only one Mennonite congregation established in Escondido, that of the Mennonite Brethren Church. While a General Conference Mennonite congregation was founded there in October 1911, this occurred shortly af-

“Parker asks rhetorically whether the Mennonites’ arrival in southern California represents a ‘menace’ or ‘prophecy of increasing good.’”

ter Parker’s article was published (and after she had already moved to Los Angeles). Based on this chronology, it appears that most of Parker’s comments relate directly to the Mennonite Brethren Church. Her mention of “Brethren,” “United Brethren,” and sometimes even “Mennonite Brethren” seem to bear this out, as does her comment that “they are immersionists.”

The article ends on a curiously ambiguous note. Parker asks rhetorically whether the Mennonites’ arrival in southern California represents a “menace” or “prophecy of increasing good.” She then cryptically comments that “the history of the Mennonites in the United States alone is the best of help in reaching an emphatic answer to that question.” She gives no clue what emphatic answer she has reached on this score, if any. Her conclusion seems to indicate that Parker herself was conflicted about the influence that Mennonites might have on the larger society.

Jane Marsh Parker’s article represents little more than a curious footnote in the historiography of Mennonites. It tells us far more about her own values than it does about those of the Mennonites. But in doing so it does shed light on the ways in which early twentieth-century Mennonites interacted with American society as a whole and how each understood the other.