

Chicago at the End of Time



Millennial Imaginings in the World's Fair City

BRECK RADULOVIC, AB'19

It was the twentieth century.... The great impulse born of the World's Fair led the citizens to decide, when the White City had gone up in flames, that their black city should be transformed according to the best thought of the world's greatest thinkers....

If Christ came to your city would He find you ready? If so you will not have long to wait.¹

The chaotic landscape of 1893 Chicago gave rise to two visions of the city. In the popular imagination, the White City of the World's Fair was glorious and perfect, while the vice districts and slums held countless terrors. Chicago's wealth and capital were alternately blamed for the destruction and hailed for the city's triumphs. To comprehend these oppositions, many turned to apocalyptic symbolism and rhetoric, most notably in *If Christ Came to Chicago*, written by British journalist William T. Stead. Much of these popular religious musings blurred theological categories of Social Gospel and pre- and postmillennialism. The plasticity of millennial imaginings among nineteenth-century liberal Protestants

1. W. T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago! A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer* (London: Review of Reviews, 1894), 415, 434.

evinced a society struggling to navigate the spectacles and dangers of the modern capitalist city, while also constructing a new understanding of time, divinity, and progress.

A year after the World's Fair Columbian Exposition the London newspaper editor, William T. Stead, presented a tantalizing vision of Chicago fifty years in the future. By the 1940s, social reformers would have all but eradicated poverty, saloons, drug stores, and prostitution; the glorious splendor of the fair, which had captivated the city from May to October 1893, would be recreated, phoenix-like, after a series of devastating fires; and the US capital would move to Chicago, the seat of government housed in a marble replica of "the architectural glories of the World's Fair."² Chicago's transformation had a simple impetus: "The Church of God in Chicago [had] only one belief, and that [was] to do what Christ would have done if He were confronted with the problems with which they have to deal."³ In other words, each Chicagoan should "Be a Christ!"⁴ Stead's vision sprung from a moral urgency: Chicago had let vice and sin run rampant. Chicagoans listened and talked about little else than the stranger's four hundred-page judgment and guide to redemption, *If Christ Came to Chicago*.

Stead arrived to a dual and dueling city in the last months of 1893. Visitors described the fair's White City as a divine revelation, a "New Jerusalem" that could rival heaven itself.⁵ The so-called Black City writhed beneath, in the vice districts where saloons, brothels, and lodging houses arose as quickly as the fair had sprung from the swamps of

2. *Ibid.*, 415.

3. *Ibid.*, 418.

4. *Ibid.*, 432.

5. W. Hamilton Gibson, "Foreground and Vista at the Fair," in *Some Artists at the Fair* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 82. "New Jerusalem" is drawn from Revelation 21:9–22:5. For one example from the vast exegesis of Revelation, see J. A. du Rand, "The Imagery of the Heavenly Jerusalem," *Neotestamentica* 22, no. 1 (1988): 65–86.

Jackson Park.⁶ These warring versions of Chicago cast an apocalyptic aura at the time of Stead's arrival, who believed that social reformers like himself would soon bring about social revolution. Both a scathing exposé and a prophetic fantasy, *If Christ Came to Chicago* polarized readers in March 1894 and quickly sold a hundred thousand copies in Chicago alone.⁷ Critics accused Stead of casting himself as the titular savior, some of his supporters called him a prophet, and he himself claimed to be a "demagogue."⁸

A liberal Protestant raised as a Congregationalist, Stead was not alone in his optimistic belief in an urban utopia.⁹ The dominant nineteenth-century Protestant eschatology was postmillennialism, which held that Jesus Christ would return to earth after a thousand-year period of blessedness and perfect Christian ethics brought about by believers.¹⁰ The appeal of postmillennialism, and apocalypticism in general, was that the

6. As used by nineteenth-century white Protestants, *Black City* carried moral and religious, rather than racial overtones. Although approximately fifteen thousand African Americans lived in Chicago in the 1890s, white Protestants were more concerned with the larger immigrations of Irish and European Catholics. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Table 14: Illinois," in *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990: For Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States* (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2005).

7. Joseph O. Baylen, "A Victorian's 'Crusade' in Chicago, 1893–1894," *Journal of American History* 50, no. 3 (Dec. 1964), 433.

8. "Stead for Reform," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1893.

9. Much utopian fiction at the time was influenced by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a futuristic utopian novel from 1888. See Peggy Ann Brown, "Edward Bellamy: An Introductory Bibliography," *American Studies International* 26, no. 2 (Oct. 1988): 37–50.

10. Eschatology refers to theology of the end times, the end of the world, and the return of the divine to earth. For most Christians, eschatology concerns the destiny of the individual soul, humanity, and all temporal reality.

progression of time was purposive and just, rather than senseless and pointless, as each century brought humanity closer to a perfect future.¹¹

Like postmillennialists, Stead believed Chicago could become the perfect city envisioned in the Revelation of John, but he also believed that the modern city was experiencing a crisis of social degradation. He turned to the opposite apocalyptic vision of premillennialism to warn Chicagoans of the dangers of social ills. Premillennialism holds that Christ will return to judge the living and the dead after a series of violent and horrific tribulations. Some readers would have understood the title of Stead's book as a very real threat—the earthly visitation of the wrathful Christ. Numerous events in the late 1890s lent themselves to apocalyptic symbolism: the assassination on the last day of the fair of Chicago's mayor, Carter Harrison, known as a people's mayor; an economic depression; increasing labor agitation; and the series of fires that destroyed the White City in early 1894. Even before the violent death of "Our Carter," as he was known to supporters, ministers and reformers had pointed to vice and crime as evidence of an imminent premillennial apocalypse.

Just as Chicagoans navigated between the grandeur of the fair and the degradation of the vice districts, journalists and theologians interpreted Chicago in the equally opposite theologies of pre- and postmillennialism. These interpretations incorporated the modern inclination toward spectacle, manipulated traditional theological assumptions, and challenged understandings of time as progressive. These popular perversions of eschatological doctrine, including *If Christ Came to Chicago*, produced new and plastic millennialisms that were created out of and for the moral tumult of the modern city.

The United States was in flux in 1890s. Industrial capitalism was transforming a formerly agrarian nation into an urban workshop of iron

11. James H. Moorhead, *World without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

and steel. American youths increasingly left rural homes and families for cities, where they worked in factories, department stores, and slaughterhouses. They were joined by immigrants, giving rise to the entangled fears of urbanization and foreigners. American moralists condemned cities for excessive drinking, gambling, and "white slavery," or prostitution—hazards that threatened to rend American society. American Christians also grappling with Darwinism and biblical criticism, which threatened the unquestioned accuracy of the Bible. These strands of social, economic, political, and religious change created a crisis for American Protestants, who feared both moral degradation and the loss of their social authority.¹²

While most scholarship of American postmillennialism and premillennialism considers the attitudes and beliefs of elite Protestants, the same pressures of modernity influenced laypeople's eschatologies. Chicago in 1893 is a rich case study to understand turmoil in liberal Protestant theology, and popular literature offers greater insight into the broader millennial imagination of the city than a focus on elites alone. Chicagoans in the hundreds of thousands read vice novels, like *If Christ Came to Chicago*, for both entertainment and personal betterment. International attention on the World's Fair caused a publishing boom in Chicago of magazine and newspaper articles, books, tour guides, and sermons about the city. The apocalyptic themes and symbols in Chicago's popular literature indicate a proliferation of changing millennial ideas.

12. Paul Boyer's *Urban Masses and Moral Order, 1820–1920* remains a definitive text on nineteenth-century social reform and Social Gospel. However, Boyer offers no general analysis of postmillennialism or apocalypticism, aside from a few allusions to growing premillennial attitudes. Boyer argues that Stead's goal was to bring supreme order to American cities, a vision which united him with other more rational urban reformers. See Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

Written by a man who appears not to have read the rules of religious orthodoxy or theological coherence, *If Christ Came to Chicago* problematized nearly every theory, tenet, and maxim of late nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. If, as Martin E. Marty contends, modern American religion is defined by its ironies and contradictions, then *If Christ Came to Chicago* is a rich case study.¹³ Floridly written and incessantly detailed, the book juxtaposed an exposé of sin with a radical utopian vision as imagined by a controversial and imperfect author who would become increasingly involved with heterodox spiritualism.¹⁴

If Christ Came to Chicago was an anomaly among late nineteenth-century liberal Protestant beliefs when compared to its theological predecessor, postmillennialism. Many nineteenth-century Americans believed that one day the world would end in an apocalypse hastened by evangelization and social reform.¹⁵ While postmillennial theology have existed for centuries, the American strand was rooted in English puritanism and the

13. Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 1, *The Irony of It All, 1893–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

14. Shortly after *If Christ Came to Chicago*, Stead abandoned Protestantism for spiritualism. He published a spiritualism journal, *Borderland* (1893–97), conducted a “census of ghosts” among *Review of Reviews* readers, and held a 1909 “interview” with the deceased William Gladstone. He was ostracized by reputable English society by the time of his death on the *Titanic* in 1912. Stead had eerily predicted in 1893 that thousands would die on the White Star Line’s *RMS Majestic* due to an encounter with an iceberg and a lack of life vests. For Stead’s spiritualism, see Laurel Brake et al., *W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary* (London: British Library, 2012).

15. In 1850, 34 percent of the US population was religious, with Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians the majority. Religiosity increased to 45 percent by 1890; Catholics were the single largest denomination (7,343), but the combined number of the largest Protestant denominations (Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian) was double (14,958) that of Catholics. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 23, 121.

Second Great Awakening.¹⁶ James Moorhead argues that during the mid-nineteenth century, postmillennialism represented a compromise between this transcendent apocalyptic view of time and a more modern evolutionary view that embraced natural science and secular thinking.¹⁷ Postmillennialism, the dominant eschatology among moderate to liberal Protestants from the Revolutionary Era to the Gilded Age, all but died out by the 1920s, challenged by increasing social pessimism after the Civil War, the rise of Darwinian, historical criticism of the Bible, income inequality, and more.

Scholars dispute the exact nature of the relationship between postmillennialism and the Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Moorhead, attention to social works was the legacy of postmillennialism’s progressive optimism: “Postmillennialism had become rather like Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire Cat, faith in continuing social and moral improvement constituting the residual grin.”¹⁸ Nancy Koester sees the Social Gospel as a “prophetic, this-worldly eschatology, opposed to an apocalyptic, transcendent one” of postmillennialism.¹⁹ William McLoughlin argues that the period from the 1890s to the 1920s saw a Third Great Awakening, in which liberal Protestants interpreted the new laws of nature as evidence of God’s omnipresence and by

16. See Catherine Wessinger, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Postmillennialism was first used in the mid-nineteenth century, but belief in gradual progress toward the millennium is found in different eras and religions; Wessinger, thus, argues that progressive millennialism is a less anachronistic term.

17. Moorhead, 23.

18. *Ibid.*, 47. See also, W. Michael Ashcraft, “Progressive Millennialism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 44–65.

19. Nancy Koester, “The Future in Our Past: Post-millennialism in American Protestantism,” *Word & World* 15, no.2 (Spring 1995), 143.

which they performed a “rescue operation to sustain the culture, redefine and relocate God[,] . . . and sacralize a new world view.”²⁰

In contrast to the rational accommodations to science and modernity by liberal Protestants, journalists and other popular writers described modern life in dramatic apocalyptic terms. Stead joined them by blending elements of pre- and postmillennialism to guide Chicagoans through the spectacular nature of the fair and the existential threat of the city’s social ills. His hybridized apocalyptic symbolism was an emotional attempt to confront and understand modern hopes and fears, spectacles and slums, divinity and time.

New Jerusalem in Old Chicago: The World’s Fair in the Apocalyptic Imagination

After the 1832 Black Hawk War, the Potawatomi relinquished their land in eastern Illinois. An influx of white settlers, unfettered capital, and a ceaseless flow of human labor created Chicago, the largest city in the West.²¹ The Great Fire of 1871 all but razed the still young city, and, a few years later, the 1886 Haymarket Affair pitted anarchists and labor activists against capitalists and police.²² The recovery and expansion after the fire made Chicago a symbol of the hardscrabble West, but the Haymarket violence solidified its reputation as dangerous and socially chaotic. Discussing the city’s trajectory from the fire to the fair, one New York preacher

20. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607–1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 152.

21. Janice L. Reiff, Ann Durkin Keating, and James R. Grossman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org.

22. Ibid.

claimed: “Chicagoans have a love for their city which we cannot have for ours, because they built their city with their own hands, but New York was built by generations 270 years ago.”²³ Yet other commentators derided the city. Rudyard Kipling wrote of his 1889 visit to Chicago: “Having seen it, I urgently desire never to see it again.”²⁴ He claimed that Chicagoans were a “terrible people who talked money through their noses.”²⁵ By hosting the next World’s Fair, Chicago’s boosters hoped to upend the city’s vulgar reputation and prove that the city was a cultural and civic rival to New York and the Old World.

Chicago’s bid for the fair was far from assured. Many doubted the city’s ability to put on a fair without national embarrassment, regardless of Chicago’s notorious self-confidence. Competition from New York, St. Louis, and Washington was intense, but in 1890 the US Congress awarded the fair to Chicago for its rail connections, the unprecedented speed of its rebuilding after the fire, and a pledge of \$4 million from a wealthy citizens’ committee.²⁶ The *Chicago Daily Tribune* announced triumphantly: “Great is Chicago. It gets the World’s Fair.”²⁷ Cartoons of victorious trumpeters decorated the front page of a special edition, alongside a drawing titled “Uncle Sam Awards the World’s Fair Prize to the Fairest of All His Daughters.”²⁸ Although Philadelphia had hosted a

23. Rev. Dr. Collyer, “From Chicago Fire to World’s Fair,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 10, 1893.

24. Rudyard Kipling, “How I Struck Chicago, and How Chicago Struck Me: Of Religion, Politics, and Pig-Sticking, and the Incarnation of the City among Shambles,” in *As Others See Chicago: Impressions of Visitors, 1673–1933*, ed. Bessie Louise Pierce (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 251.

25. Ibid., 252.

26. Donald L. Miller, *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 379.

27. “Chicago Wins,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 25, 1890.

28. Ibid.

World's Fair in 1876 in honor of the US centennial, the planned 1892 fair, which celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World, was America's chance to prove itself, especially after the success of 1889 fair in Paris. A committee of Chicago's leading businessmen and politicians, including Philip Armour, Marshall Field, the Palmers, and George Pullman, commissioned the Chicago architectural firm of Burnham and Root and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to pull off the grandest fair yet in less than three years.²⁹

The Celestial City

The dedication ceremony on Friday, October, 21, 1892, drew thousands of spectators, despite the muddy grounds and scanty construction. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* glamourized the scene: "The guns that saluted the rising sun over the waters of Lake Michigan yesterday morning announced not only the dedication of the World's Columbian Exposition, but the beginning of the world's millennium. That is to say, the booming of the cannon ushered in a new era in the world's history ... the Columbian Exposition [is] the highest realization yet vouchsafed to man of his ideals of development."³⁰ That Sunday, Rev. Dr. Clinton Locke of Grace Episcopal Church, a powerful mainstream institution, used the dedication as a parable of both human and moral progress. He likened the fair's building to "sermons in stone" and "palaces of art," which would prove that "we can advance from the level of the savage brute to the heights of genius"; the fair allowed Christians to "look forward to that happy time when all men shall love each other" until "the last act in the world's drama," meaning the millennium.³¹

Attempts to reconcile evolutionary human progress with religious

29. Robert W. Rydell, "World's Columbian Exposition," in *Encyclopedia of Chicago*.

30. "Dedication—Exposition Buildings Presented by the Columbian Commission to the Nation," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 22, 1892.

31. "It Teaches the Gospel of Peace," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1892.

millennial traditions were not uncommon in the period. The new theory of evolution potentially challenged Christian doctrine. Rather than deny science or abandon long-held religious doctrine, some liberal Protestants sought to unify evolution and millennialism. On the other hand, evangelicals, like Chicago's famous revivalist, Billy Sunday, rejected Darwinism outright. Other Protestants attributed evolution to God's design or abandoned millennialism altogether.³² Many visitors and commentators concluded that while the fair might represent the millennium, it was not necessarily God alone but human ambition that Chicago could thank for its splendor.

Rev. Herbert Stead, the brother of William Stead and a fellow reformer in London, attended the fair's opening day, May 1, 1893, as the exposition correspondent for his brother's monthly journal, the *Review of Reviews*. He wrote: "The great white city which rose before me, silent and awful, seemed to belong to an order of things above our common world.... It was an Apocalypse of the architectural imagination.... It was a vision of the ideal, enhaloed with mystery."³³ Stead quoted a fellow visitors' impressions that the fair resembled a New Jerusalem (Fig. 1): "This would have given 'points' to the writer of Revelations, had he seen it."³⁴ Another British commentator, Walter Besant, described the fair through the eyes of an "Average Pair" from small-town American:

These lines of columns; these many statues standing against the deep, blue sky; these domes; these carvings and towers and marvels reflected in the waters of the Lagoon—will this Pair ever forget them? When they have seen at night the innumerable lines of white electric light; the domes outlined with the yellow light; the electric fountain; the illuminations; the gleaming waters.... It will remain

32. McLoughlin, 146, 154.

33. Herbert Stead, "The Opening of the World's Fair," *Review of Reviews*, June 1893.

34. *Ibid.*

in their minds as the Vision of St. John—an actual sight of the New Jerusalem; all the splendors that the apostle describes they will henceforth understand.³⁵

To see New Jerusalem was to see both the end of time and heaven, as depicted in the book of Revelation. Revelation is known for cataclysmic violence, but postmillennialists often spoke of the massive gilded city depicted in chapter 21, whose verses would have had particular resonance for fairgoers like the Average Pair: “The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”³⁶ Some rural fairgoers saw electric light for the first time while visiting the White City: modern science had made possible what Revelation attributed to the apocalypse.

The Midway, which welcomed more visitors than the White City itself, might seem to diminish commentators’ declarations of divine perfection. Called the “Department of Ethnology” by fair organizers, it could be more accurately described as a racist imperialist human zoo and carnival.³⁷ Among the “harmless seductions” were “the bad men from Borneo, savages from the Cannibal islands, Algerians, Bedouins, Turks, Indians, Laplanders, and Javanese.”³⁸ The Midway was “redeemed from the commonplace by ... the Ferris wheel, whose huge circumference seems like part of the solar system.”³⁹ The Midway reinforced Western cultural superiority, with the *Cosmopolitan* assuring its audience that “we are living

35. Walter Besant, “A First Impression,” *Cosmopolitan*, Sept. 1893, 538.

36. Revelation 21:23.

37. Rosemarie K. Bank, “Representing History: Performing the Columbian Exposition,” *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 4 (Dec. 2002): 590–92.

38. John J. Ingalls, “Lessons of the Fair,” *Cosmopolitan*, Dec. 1893.

39. *Ibid.*



Figure 1: E. R. Walker, World’s Columbian Exposition Court of Honor. University of Chicago Photographic Archives (apf3-00077), Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

in the best age of history and the most favored portion of the globe.”⁴⁰ Another observer wrote that the Midway represented the “sliding scale of humanity.”⁴¹ Dozens of countries created small exhibits, with European nations like Germany situated closer to the White City than voyeuristic, caricatured reproductions of North African villages. Others understood the contrast between the White City and the “mile-long babel” of the Midway as representative of heaven and earth: a character in a pulp novel says that “perhaps dyin’ is goin’ to be somethin’ like crossin’ the dividin’ line that separates the Midway from the White City.”⁴²

40. *Ibid.*

41. Quoted in Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 65.

42. Clara Louise Burnham, *Sweet Clover: A Romance of the White City* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1894), 201–2. Clara (née Root) Burnham is apparently not related to Daniel Burnham or John Root.

Fair organizers structured the Midway so that as a visitor approached the White City the ethnographic exhibits became ever whiter, culminating in an architectural expression of American exceptionalism. This architectural program established that white supremacy was ordained by God as part of America's teleology and was demonstrated by evolution as scientific. Journalist Ida B. Wells boycotted the fair for this reason, arguing that if the fair were really a "tribute to the greatness and progressiveness of American institutions," it would have exhibited the "progress made by a race in 25 years of freedom as against 250 years of slavery."⁴³ The fair's only references to slavery and emancipation were a small exhibit about Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the Woman's Building and the inclusion of the Haitian Pavilion in the White City, rather than on the Midway.⁴⁴

Many scholars debate how and whether the fair's underlying ethos of consumption, racial hierarchies, and capitalism is compatible with its common epithets as a "New Jerusalem" and "Celestial City." Eric Ziolkowski argues that the fair used the sacred ambiance of American Protestantism to prove the superiority of American capital and culture.⁴⁵ Phillip Mackintosh and Clyde Forsberg noted that some Protestant city planners considered wealth and urbanization as vehicles of religious

43. Ida B. Wells, ed., preface to *The Reason Why the Colored American Is not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: printed by the author, 1893), 4, www.loc.gov/item/mfd.25023.

44. Barbara Hochman, "Uncle Tom's Cabin at the World's Columbian Exposition," in *The Woman's Building Library of the World's Columbian Exposition*, ed. Sarah Wadsworth, special issue, *Libraries & Culture* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 82–108; Frederick Douglass, *Lecture on Haiti: The Haitian Pavilion* (Chicago: Violet Agents Supply Co., 1893), www.loc.gov/item/02012340.

45. Eric Ziolkowski, "Heavenly Visions and Wordily Intentions: Chicago's Columbian Exposition and World's Parliament of Religions (1893)," *Journal of American Culture* 13, no. 4 (Dec. 1990): 9–15.

progress and included postmillennialism ideas in their work.⁴⁶ The historian Gary Scott Smith argues that Gilded Age Protestants "emphasized the happiness, holiness, and love of heaven,"⁴⁷ which suited the opulence of their lives. James Gilbert, on the other hand, claims that the fair failed in its goal of balancing the heavenly impression of the White City with the unfettered consumerism of the Midway.⁴⁸ The Midway had been offered as a mass-entertainment "concession," but eventually it dwarfed the high-minded White City in attendance, revenue, and lasting importance.⁴⁹

Kipling had observed this blending of the sacred and profane in Chicago four years before the fair. At "a place officially described as a church," he watched the preacher build up "for his hearers a heaven on the lines of the Palmer House."⁵⁰ When a concerned parishioner asked if he should be afraid of Judgment Day, the preacher responded, "No! I tell you God don't do business that way."⁵¹ The preacher was "giving them a deity whom they could comprehend, in a gold and jewel heaven in which they could take a natural interest."⁵²

Many turn-of-the-century Protestants held fluid millennial categories that helped them to understand the complexity of the fair and Chicago—each a patchwork of high culture and crass entertainment. They could

46. See Phillip G. Mackintosh and Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., "Co-Agent of the Millennium: City Planning and Christian Eschatology in the North American City, 1890–1920," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 3 (2013): 743.

47. Gary Scott Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 133.

48. James Gilbert, *Perfect Cities: Chicago's Utopias of 1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 130.

49. *Ibid.*, 128.

50. Kipling, 253.

51. *Ibid.*, 254.

52. *Ibid.*

experience the heavenly New Jerusalem just after visiting the riotous Midway, and the sensuality of the Midway only heightened the apocalyptic symbolism of the White City. As fairgoers walked through the Midway into the White City, they mimicked society's progress towards the millennium. The architectural design of the fair overlaid present-day Chicago with Columbus's arrival in the New World and the imagery of Revelation, creating a through line linking the first, fifteenth, and nineteenth centuries with the millennium.

Autumn Leaves Doubly Deep: Chicago Bids Farewell to the White City

For all its splendor, the White City's spectacle provided but a temporary distraction from the ravages of urban chaos. While visitors milled about the fairgrounds, Chicago's reformers and moralizers worked to eradicate vice and sin from the city's slums, but the saloon owners, gamblers, and brothelkeepers were equally intent on maintaining their domain. Historian Carl Smith contends that through the end of the nineteenth century "urban disorder became the shape of belief."⁵³ After the Great Fire, Haymarket Affair, and the impending Pullman Strike, "disorder on a significant scale was normalized, and in this view, for better and for worse, the city in disorder was the city at its most urban."⁵⁴ In the broader scheme of Chicago's urban imagination, the fantastical World's Fair was just that—a fantasy. The true Chicago was the slums and vice districts known as the Black City. As powerful an image as its dreamlike counterpart, the Black City of 1893 generated its own apocalyptic rhetoric and symbolism that in turn shaped and defined the eschatological imaginings of Chicago.

53. Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

54. Ibid.

The city was reminded of the pandemonium outside of the White City at the fair's end. In late October, Mayor Carter Harrison addressed a gathering of American mayors. He proclaimed in typically brash style that he would live to see Chicago become the greatest city in the world, for Chicago "knows nothing that it will not attempt, and thus far has found nothing that it cannot accomplish."⁵⁵ He spoke of his sadness at the closing of the fair, announcing his intention to keep the grounds open for another year before burning the White City, which had been constructed out of impermanent staff and wood, "let[ting] it go up into the bright sky of eternal heaven."⁵⁶ Harrison had every reason to feel triumphant: the fair had been a tremendous success, and he was to marry early the next month. A Chicago paper wrote that "he personified in himself all the restlessness, the energy, the ability, and the ambition which have built the World's Fair city into the greatest metropolis in the Nation."⁵⁷ Despite the economic depression that ensnared the country in 1893, Harrison had overseen Chicago's most remarkable year, inspiring the admiration and envy of the other mayors. It was the last speech he ever gave.

Later that night, Patrick Eugene Prendergast knocked on the door of Harrison's Ashland Boulevard mansion. A maid allowed the visitor in, as Harrison was known to hold audiences with all sorts of Chicagoans—perhaps no mayor had been so friendly to the city's immigrants and working class. Prendergast shot Harrison four times before surrendering at a nearby police station.⁵⁸ Prendergast told the police that he had assassinated Harrison because the mayor had failed to find him a city job, a

55. "His Last Address," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 29, 1893.

56. Ibid.

57. Quoted in Miller, 348.

58. Richard Allen Morton, "A Victorian Tragedy: The Strange Deaths of Mayor Carter H. Harrison and Patrick Eugene Prendergast," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 96, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 7–8.

reward of the so-called spoils system. The Chicago press labeled Prendergast a “crank,” much like President James A. Garfield’s assassin, Charles Guiteau.⁵⁹ On what was supposed to be the triumphant close of the fair, half a million took to the streets for Harrison’s funeral.⁶⁰ Some threatened to lynch Prendergast, but most were silent, showing their support for their slain leader with badges that read “Our Carter.”⁶¹

Chicago’s preachers devoted their sermons to Harrison’s assassination. Rev. O. P. Gifford of Immanuel Baptist Church was particularly sorrowful: “The hand of crime has spread a pall over the glory and pride of Chicago. Like a white lily touched by a frost it blackens and withers.”⁶² Baptist preacher P. S. Henson contrasted the orderliness and beauty of the fair with the lawlessness consuming Chicago: “If there had been a more reverent regard for the laws of God and man,” then “the sun that rose so brilliantly upon our opening might have set in soft splendor instead of such a lurid glare, and the last page of the Columbian Exposition need not have been written in blood and tears.”⁶³ Rev. David Swing, Chicago’s most beloved minister, told a large crowd at the Central Music Hall that the assassination made “the layer of autumn leaves doubly deep.”⁶⁴

59. “Harrison is Killed,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 29, 1893. Guiteau also claimed that Garfield had defaulted on a promised political appointment in exchange for support during the campaign.

60. “Funeral of Carter Harrison (Summary),” *Dziennik Chicagoski*, Nov. 2, 1893, Foreign Language Press Survey, Newberry Library, flps.newberry.org/article/5423968_9_0206.

61. Miller, 437.

62. O. P. Gifford, “Pardons Set a Premium on Anarchy,” From the Pulpits, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1893.

63. P. S. Henson, “Setting of the Fair’s Sun,” From the Pulpits, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1893.

64. David Swing, “Autumn Leaves Doubly Deep,” From the Pulpits, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1893.

Harrison had attended an Episcopal church, but his tolerance of gambling, saloons, and brothels, coupled with his close ties to Catholic Irish and German immigrants, won him few friends among the Protestant clergy. Most shied away from blaming Harrison for his own assassination, but a visiting Congregational minister from Boston, Rev. Isaac Lansing, suggested Harrison’s policies as the motive: “If Carter Harrison was right in his policy toward law breakers,” then “this murder . . . is justified. But if this murder is, as I affirm, a diabolical crime, then all the immorality and lawlessness which encourage contempt for laws of both God and man . . . are to be condemned.”⁶⁵ The preachers spoke of a growing lawlessness and disorder in their sermons and implied that the violent end to the World’s Fair was divine retribution. Harrison’s assassination, a looming winter recession, and increased attention to vice and sin prompted the city to reconsider the fair’s postmillennial utopia. Perhaps Chicago was due for a different kind of apocalypse.

“Reaping the Whirlwind”

The public grief following Harrison’s assassination contrasted with his bitter mayoral campaign a few months before. Harrison reclaimed the mayor’s office for his fifth term in the spring of 1893, after having lost reelection in 1887 for his handling of the Haymarket Affair. The city’s moralizers, among them the *Chicago Tribune’s* publisher and editor, Joseph Medill, fought ruthlessly to keep him out of office. Historian Donald Miller writes that the *Tribune’s* anti-Harrison coverage was “almost unprecedented in American urban politics.”⁶⁶ Reformers and temperance advocates branded Harrison an irredeemable supporter of the saloons and “gambling hells.” Harrison himself agreed with this assessment, telling the *Chicago Times*: “You can’t make people moral by

65. Isaac J. Lansing, “Lenient Toward Law Breakers,” From the Pulpits, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1893.

66. Miller, 427.

ordinance and it is no use trying. This is a free town.”⁶⁷ Later, one of his advisers said that Harrison “consistently held that the masses are better judges of their own needs than are the constituted censors of the press or of ‘citizen’s associations.’”⁶⁸ Despite these criticisms, Harrison’s success reelection demonstrated the weakened influence of Protestant institutions in city life.

The assassination of Carter Harrison illuminated apocalyptic possibilities for premillennial ministers, too. In late October, the First Congregational Church invited Rev. Joseph Cook to preach. It is likely that he was a Boston preacher who came to Chicago through his affiliation with the evangelist Dwight Moody.⁶⁹ The preacher told the audience, “Red floats across the American sun”—an appeal to public fears of communism, anarchy, and immigration. John Wilkes Booth, Charles Guiteau, and Eugene Prendergast represented “a trinity of infamy, a trinity of lawlessness, a trinity that no other nation could have produced within so short a time.” This trinity of assassins, in direct opposition to the sacred trinity, suggested an antichrist common to the premillennial apocalyptic narrative. Drawing from Hosea 8:7, Cook asked: “Can we sow the wind and not reap the whirlwind?”⁷⁰ That same Sunday, Rev. Lansing also turned to Hosea to discuss lawlessness with the congregation of Third Presbyterian: “We have sown the wind, we are reaping the whirlwind. Alas that in the reaping the whirlwind should have struck the city’s Chief Executive.”⁷¹

Hosea 8:7—“for they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid, 449.

69. Dwight Lyman Moody, *The Gospel Awakening: Comprising the Sermons and Addresses, Prayer-Meeting Talks and Bible Readings of the Great Revival Meetings Conducted by Moody and Sankey* (Saint Louis, MO: F. H. Revell, 1883), 44.

70. “Pardons and Assassinations,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1893.

71. “Lenient Toward Law Breakers,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1893.

whirlwind”—is more apocalyptic than just getting one’s just deserts. A widely read contemporary commentary interpreted the phrase to mean Israel’s “present conduct is unprofitable to himself, and the requital of it shall be actual destruction.”⁷² Preachers Cook and Lansing and the biblically literate members of the audience would have understood this passage as a warning of God’s wrath. The assassination of a mayor, notoriously agnostic to sin, was a sign of apocalyptic consequences for ignoring God’s law. As the autumn of 1893 continued, commentators noticed another premillennial harbinger. Hosea’s final verse is a prophetic apocalyptic image of a coming catastrophe in the White City: “For Israel hath forgotten his maker, and buildeth temples . . . but I will send fire upon his cities, and shall devour the palaces thereof.”⁷³

In Memory, A Monument of Flame

The Panic of 1893 was affecting the rest of the country, but fair-related construction had temporarily protected Chicago.⁷⁴ Now, men who had worked at the fairgrounds or in the tourism surrounding twenty-six million fairgoers were out of work. Many had come to Chicago expecting unlimited success and could not leave once jobs disappeared. Others continued to flock to Chicago, believing the myth of economic prosperity that the White City had offered only a few months prior. By the end of the fair, a hundred thousand people were out of work in Chicago—nearly 10 percent of the population.⁷⁵ In the evocative words of William Stead,

72. T. K. Cheyne, *Hosea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), 88.

73. Hosea 8:14. I quote from the King James Version, which the historical actors likely read.

74. Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864–97*, Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 332. Sincere thanks to Grace Ann Quigley, AB’19, for her help and astute description of the economic crisis.

75. Ibid.

“Like the frogs in the Egyptian plague, you could not escape from the tramps go where you would.”⁷⁶ The city was in crisis. Many of those newly without shelter moved into the desolate White City ruins, setting fire to fairground detritus for warmth.⁷⁷

On a frigid day in early January 1894, the icy remnants of the Court of Honor went up in flames (Fig. 2). The *Tribune* blamed the fire on “insolent tramps.”⁷⁸ A crowd of twenty thousand watched the inferno: “A shower of sparks fell upon the ice in the lagoon until it looked like a sea of fire. . . . It was the greatest pyrotechnic display of the Fair.”⁷⁹ Within a few hours the Columbus Quadriga and Peristyle were destroyed, revealing the “blood-red skeleton of arch and column.”⁸⁰

To some, the fair’s destruction was more dramatic and entertaining than its original splendor. Some judged the fire to be the “best possible solution” to the problem of the abandoned White City.⁸¹ Reactions in national newspapers ranged from sorrow to barely contained glee at Chicago’s misfortune. The *Sioux City Journal* wrote that “to the poetic it may seem that so much beauty elected suicide rather than undergo the murder of piecemeal dismemberment.”⁸² The *Minneapolis Journal* declared the conflagration preferable over “moth and rust corrupt[ing] and the tooth of time nibbl[ing] at its decaying columns.”⁸³

76. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 1.

77. For a discussion of the depression, which lasted four years, see Douglas W. Steeples and David O. Whitten, *Democracy in Desperation: The Depression of 1893* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1998).

78. “Fair Is Fire Swept,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 9, 1894.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. “Fair Flames,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 12, 1894.

83. *Ibid.*



Figure 2: Peristyle after the Fire. Chicago History Museum.

A number of smaller fires in January and February destroyed more of the fairgrounds, and by July nearly every building had burned to the ground.⁸⁴ On July 5, a fire raged for three hours and drew over a hundred thousand spectators to Jackson Park. After much speculation that the fair would be dismantled and auctioned off by salvage companies, a *Tribune* writer, using the initials EJM, thought that most Chicagoans were pleased “that the elements and not the wrecker should wipe out the spectacle of the Columbian season.”⁸⁵ EJM offered one of the few self-reflexive commentaries on the desolation: “The fire showed no disposition to ravish” the lesser buildings of the fairground, like an uncompleted auditorium known as MacKaye’s Spectatorium, but destroyed its beautiful center. EJM speculated that it was “perhaps in anticipation of the rise of anarchy in the Black City that the Spirit of Beauty fled in garments of flame from

84. The fireproofed Palace of Fine Art survived and is now the Museum of Science and Industry. See Chicago Architecture Center, www.architecture.org/learn/resources/buildings-of-chicago/building/museum-of-science-and-industry.

85. EJM, “White City Burned,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 6, 1894.

the fairest shrine that men ever raised in her worship.”⁸⁶ To EJM, the fire was America’s coming of age. EJM reflected on John Ruskin’s remark that America had no ruins and concluded that “she has them now.... As one turns northward and sees the clouds that are lowering over the Black City one cannot help fearing that we may one day have other ruins than those described to show to Mr. Ruskin.”⁸⁷ For all the optimism of the social reformers and the fascination of the fire’s spectators, EJM could not help but wonder what the destruction of such beauty meant in the face of urban chaos.

Into the Malebolge: Chicago’s Slums and the Black City

Urban slums haunted the nation’s imagination at the close of the nineteenth century. Novels, newspaper articles, and statistical reports purported to show the true nature of the Black City. The thick, braided tangle of Chicago’s poverty, polluted industries, and moral corruption had no definite boundaries. Vice districts and tenement housing appeared quickly, only to be eradicated by city officials within months. These amoebic slums encompassed much of the city’s industrial core. Smoke and offal poured out of factories and slaughterhouses, while deadly railways “cross and recross the city, and form a complex network of tracks, every mesh of which is stained with human blood.”⁸⁸ Upton Sinclair would make the slaughterhouses infamous in *The Jungle* (1906), but for Stead, it was the railways that resembled “one of Doré’s pictures of a scene in Dante’s hell.”⁸⁹ Capitalist industry and progress celebrated in the fair’s Manufacturing Hall had a very different tenor in the Black City.

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid.

88. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 181.

89. Ibid., 185.

Italian playwright Giuseppe Giacosa, who visited the fair, wrote that “the dominant characteristic of the exterior life of Chicago is violence. Everything leads you to extreme expressions: dimensions, movements, noises, rumors, window displays, spectacles, ostentation, misery, activity and alcoholic degradation.”⁹⁰

Far worse than poverty and industrial pollution was vice. Saloons, brothels, and gambling halls brought Stead and other reformers into the Black City. Districts like the Levee, the Black Hole, and Little Hell had almost twice as many saloons as elsewhere in the city, according to Labor Commissioner Carroll Wright.⁹¹ While only one in eleven people in Chicago experienced crime in 1893, one in four residents of the 2nd- and 21st-district slums were victims of crimes.⁹² The districts were loosely located in what is today Chicago’s South Loop, between Harrison and Polk Streets. Stead, in the melodramatic rhetoric of the times, said: “As of adverse Destiny, the dislodged unit gravitates downward, ever downward into the depths of the malebolgic pool of our social hell.”⁹³ In the malebolge of Dante’s *Inferno*, concentric funnel-like ditches prevent the soul’s escape; in Chicago, poverty, drunkenness, and moral degradation trapped those who entered the Levee. The Black City had existed before the White City, but the close of the fair, the assassination of Carter Harrison, and the economic depression focused the city’s attention on its moral darkness. Whereas the White City represented white, Protestant, capitalist achievement, the Black City was majority foreign born, often Catholic, and incredibly poor. Wright calculated that 15 percent of Chicago’s population lived in these slums.⁹⁴

90. Giuseppe Giacosa, “A City of Smoke,” in *As Others See Chicago*, 278.

91. Carroll Wright, *The Slums of Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia* (Washington, DC: United States Congress, 1894), 19.

92. Ibid, 16.

93. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 16.

94. Wright, 18.

Sensational, purportedly factual books about the slums were a staple of urban publishing houses before Stead's. *Chicago's Dark Places*, released in 1891 and republished in 1893 as the more commercial *Mysteries of Chicago*, examined the "many dark 'dens' and 'black holes' of Chicago."⁹⁵ George Wharton James hope his book would "result in the awakening of the People of Chicago to the urgent needs and demands of the present hour."⁹⁶ He examined the saloons, prisons, and brothels of the Black City, using personal anecdotes and proto-sociology. *Mysteries of Chicago* is a bleaker text than Stead's. Stead complimented the saloons as hubs of political activity and feeders of the poor, but James argued against the practice of providing a free meal with a drink. Saloon owners "rob and pillage their poor victims, who are so blinded by their devilish arts as to be willing to be thus plundered ... of money ... health, position, character, honor and religion."⁹⁷ The cost to human life "can never be fully known until the day of judgment, when the whole of this infernal traffic will be banished to the hell to which it belongs, and from whence it sprang."⁹⁸

Divine judgment and punishment fill *Mysteries of Chicago*, but James never endorsed a particular millennial belief: "Whilst we don't believe the millennium would dawn on Chicago," if saloons were eradicated "so much wretchedness and poverty would disappear as to make it a heaven to many whose existence in it now is a continual hell."⁹⁹ James's concerns with immediate welfare for the poor is closer to the Social Gospel moment. He argues that if Chicago's Christians were truly determined, then not "three months would elapse before there would be such

95. George Wharton James, *Mysteries of Chicago* (Chicago: Craig Press, 1893), 9.

96. *Ibid.*, 10.

97. *Ibid.*, 45.

98. *Ibid.*, 35.

99. *Ibid.*, 34.

a change as would make Chicago a heaven to these poor wretches, after the hell it has been and now is to them."¹⁰⁰

"Temporal Power in America": Slums, Immigrants, and a Catholic Armageddon

Chicago's native-born elites blamed the problems of the slums on Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Eastern Europe. The 1890 census revealed that nearly half (450,666) of Chicago's 1,099,850 residents were foreign born, and 855,523 persons of native or foreign birth had at least one foreign-born parent.¹⁰¹ Although the census did not record religious affiliation, 70,028 were Irish, 25,105 Bohemian, and 24,086 Polish, all majority-Catholic ethnic groups.¹⁰² A further 188,232 were German, a country of both Catholic and Protestant beliefs.¹⁰³ Chicago had thirty-eight Catholic parishes before 1880; Irish and Eastern European immigrants built ninety-four new churches between 1880 and 1902.¹⁰⁴ The increase in Catholic parishes far outpaced Protestant growth, giving rise to anti-Catholic rumors, including a fear of Catholic revolution. In October 1892, Rev. R. S. Martin of the Methodist Episcopal Church claimed that an "unquestionably authentic" secret circular written by

100. *Ibid.*, 169. No evidence exists that James considered himself a millennialist of any stripe, but his publisher Craig Press did produce a few premillennialist tracts in the early 1890s; book advertisements in the back of *Mysteries of Chicago* included *The Illustrated Apocalypse* by Thomas William Greenwell, which was "decidedly in sympathy with the premillennial principle of interpretation," according to the *Boston Herald*.

101. Charles H. Shanabruch, *Chicago's Catholics: The Evolution of an American Identity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 235.

102. *Ibid.*, 236.

103. *Ibid.*

104. *Ibid.*, 235.

Pope Leo XIII on Christmas Day 1891 “called upon the church to assume temporal power in the United States” and to “grant absolution in advance to all who had taken the oath of allegiance to the United States, to break that oath in favor of the Pontiff ‘on or about Sept. 5, 1893,’” the day of a Catholic congress affiliated with the World’s Fair.¹⁰⁵ While a number of the audience supposedly left in the middle of the sermon, the *Tribune* reported that it was “frequently interrupted by the applause of the congregation” and “many members gathered about the pastor to congratulate him for attacking Catholicism.”¹⁰⁶ Martin claimed the circular was specifically targeted at immigrant citizens who had recently taken an oath of allegiance to the United States, a population that far outnumbered native-born Chicagoans. Similar to anti-Semitic backlash towards Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who were feared as “a stranger to loyalty,”¹⁰⁷ the relationship between the pope and Catholics threatened American notions of democracy, personal liberty, and secular government.

“Like Old Jerusalem”: Chicago Marching Toward Destruction

Some of Chicago’s most prominent ministers, like Presbyterian John Barrows, helped organize the fair, but others criticized the fair as a distraction from the terrible conditions of the slums.¹⁰⁸ A Baptist preacher

105. R. S. Martin, “Temporal Power in America,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 17, 1892. Rumors of Catholic plots to seize the American government during public holidays and festivals persisted into the twentieth-century era of the second Ku Klux Klan. See Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

106. Ibid.

107. Bernard Lazare, *Antisemitism: Its History and Causes* (New York: International Library, 1908), 332.

108. Barrows chaired the fair’s religious parliament. See John Henry Barrows, *The World’s Parliament of Religions* (Chicago: Parliament, 1893).

accused the city of “hid[ing] some astonishing and tremendous degrees of wretchedness” in a sermon on the eve of the fair.¹⁰⁹ At the fair’s height, a Rev. Wheeler contrasted the “magnificent White City” with “the lamentable spectacle of thousands of unemployed men crying for bread.”¹¹⁰ Rev. P. S. Henson, a Baptist, bemoaned the modern tendency to ignore moral degradation, a common fundamentalist critique: “Our age is less disposed to believe in [hell] . . . for it has the highest conception of man and the lowest of God.”¹¹¹ He reminded the congregants that hell is “here on earth in a human bosom, and sin will make a hell anywhere. . . . God has nothing to do but just let man loose upon himself and he will make a hell for himself wherever he goes.”¹¹² Wheeler and Henson warned that the “violation of the laws of God and a shameless disregard of moral as well as religious obligations” caused the social ills of the Black City.¹¹³ If God chose to truly punish these violations, the “destructive elements at work” would “make a hell of this globe.”¹¹⁴

Baptists like Wheeler and Henson were early advocates of premillennialism. Their sermons warned that God would “let loose” apocalyptic forces on the earth if human morality were to degrade. While mainstream liberal Protestants turned to Social Gospel or progressive postmillennialism to urge reform, premillennialists favored fear. However, even professed postmillennialists sometimes interpreted the city’s moral evils in terms of fire and brimstone. Simon McPherson, a prominent Presbyterian minister, was confident that “God cannot fail in the end,” but he was less certain of Chicago’s fate. Speaking to the city of the World’s Fair, he said

109. H. A. Delano, “Moral Needs of Chicago,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 16, 1893.

110. “These Times of Trouble,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 4, 1893.

111. “‘Hell’ Discussed by Dr. Henson,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1892.

112. Ibid.

113. “These Times of Trouble,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 4, 1893.

114. “‘Hell’ Discussed by Dr. Henson,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1892.

that “Jerusalem was likewise a festival city,” “notable for its beauty” and wealth. However, Jerusalem was “blind to the lessons of history... They who ought to have saved the city were forcing it on to the inevitable catastrophe.” When Jerusalem was destroyed like Nineveh, Sodom, and Babylon, it was “suicide” by moral evil. McPherson’s violent warning resembled premillennial warnings and also transposed a biblical event onto the modern city.¹¹⁵ The White City was a similar historical conflation, combining Columbus’s 1492 journey with present-day Chicago and the future millennium. The apocalyptic possibilities of 1893 Chicago made time itself fungible.

McPherson, as a liberal Protestant, believed that apocalypse could be avoided: “But if Christ wept as he looked upon Jerusalem he rejoiced as he looked up toward the New Jerusalem. Could we have a converted, Christianized Chicago?”¹¹⁶ McPherson was at heart a postmillennialist who believe that apocalypse was conditional at the local level: if Chicago surmounted the moral odds and followed Christ, the city could change its eschatological trajectory.

The slums encapsulated turn-of-the-century Protestants’ fears. Slum dwellers were morally degraded: at best they were Catholics, beholding to a foreign, papal authority, and at worst they were hard-drinking brothel-going criminals. Some Protestants, like Wright, the labor commissioner, used science and reason to ferret out the causes of corruption, a technique later adapted by Social Gospel Christians like George Wharton James. Others appealed to the supernatural, dangling the carrot of postmillennial perfection or the stick of premillennial punishment before their congregants. Yet, even as McPherson threatened that catastrophe was imminent, postmillennialist tradition required that he gesture at the millennium, too. Ministerial influence and the eradication of sin were more important

115. Simon McPherson, “Christ Mourning Over the Impending Fall of Jerusalem,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 4, 1893.

116. *Ibid.*

than strict theological purity. Categories that had been immutable in American Protestantism had begun to warp under the pressures of the modern city.

Satan’s Invisible World Displayed: Stead Comes to Chicago

William Stead’s *If Christ Came to Chicago*, published in March 1894, captured the eschatological drama unfolding in the split city. Called “the most sensational book of the decade,”¹¹⁷ it “allegedly sold seventy thousand copies on its publication day.”¹¹⁸ Stead demanded of “the men of the world, to busy administrators, to labour agitators, to the crook and to the harlot, the question: ‘If He came to Chicago, what would He think of us and our lives?’”¹¹⁹ The proposition was premillennial, arguing that Christ could return to earth to levy judgment on the city. Yet, despite his condemnation, Stead believed Chicago could pull itself out of the mire of the Black City. Stead painted a picture of Chicago’s future, a stronger postmillennial vision of the perfect urban landscape than even the White City had been. Stead collapsed the two forms of millennialism that had hung over the city in the wake of the World’s Fair. Rev. Josiah Strong expressed Chicago’s paradox in a review of the book: “Chicago is at the same time one of the worst and one of the best cities in America. Nowhere is wickedness more wicked, and nowhere is goodness more aggressive.”¹²⁰ For Stead and many others, it seemed equally likely that the city would suffer Christ’s judgment or bring the dream of the White City to fruition.

117. Baylen, 418; “Stead and Chicago,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Mar. 11, 1894.

118. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “*If Christ Came to Chicago*,” in *Encyclopedia of Chicago*.

119. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, ix.

120. Quoted in William Stead, “If Christ Came to Chicago,” *Review of Reviews* (London: April 1894), 366.

Stead, forty-five years old, the son of a Congregationalist minister, and a lifelong Congregationalist, was widely known for his efforts to end child prostitution in England. More notoriously, Stead served a three-month prison sentence in 1886 after an ill-conceived stunt to draw the public's attention to "white slavery" by purchasing a thirteen-year-old girl from her mother. These reform efforts and his successful monthly journal, the *Review of Reviews*, made Stead perhaps Britain's best-known newspaper editor.¹²¹

Over two days in November, the *Tribune* devoted four pages, including a nine-column interview, to the whereabouts, actions, and opinions of this famous English journalist and reformer. Stead's arrival coincided with the end of the 1893 Colombian Exposition. He was initially far more interested in the work of Jane Addams, Thomas J. Morgan, and other social reformers than in the fair. He had earlier instructed his brother, Rev. Herbert Stead, to report on the White City, which had tempted him to come to Chicago. Herbert convinced his brother to attend the fair's closing day on October 30, 1893. Stead said in his *Tribune* interview, "I must honestly say that if you allow these buildings [of the fair] to be destroyed the fact will be fraught with same and disgrace to your children's children. Of Chicago it may be said, as it was said of the still more eminent and ambitious entity, 'How art though fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, Star of the Morning?'"¹²² Stead was enchanted by the World's Fair, and he began to see Chicago as a potential moral replacement for Europe, despite the threat posed by the slums.

In early November, Stead's thinking was not premillennial, but he was thinking about the trajectory of history. Apparently unconcerned with an imminent apocalypse, his focus on "your children's children" demonstrated a future-oriented approach for Chicago, which was less than sixty years past its incorporation as a city and only twenty-two years beyond

121. W. T. Stead, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, ed. Antony E. Simpson (Lambertville, NJ: True Bill Press, 2007).

122. "Stead for Reform," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1893.

its Great Fire. However, he believed Chicago's future children would be fixated on the past, mourning the loss of the World's Fair buildings. Like his brother, who discussed the fair as a New Jerusalem, Stead brought together several moments in time by referencing the life of Jesus Christ, Chicago's present, and Chicago's glorious future.

Stead, unlike most visitors, ventured beyond the fair to the slums. He journeyed with private detectives to Chicago's vice districts, known as Cheyenne and the Levee, to meet and talk with drunkards, tramps, gamblers, and prostitutes, which shocked the press and Chicago's religious elite. He held two talks, announced with provocative posters and flyers: "W. T. Stead of London, who was imprisoned for his sympathy with the fallen, invites you to be present at the Central Music Hall this afternoon and evening, 2:30 and 7:30 o'clock."¹²³ The talks were the height of Stead's influence in Chicago. Over two thousand members of every social strata attended: "Preachers and saloonkeepers, gamblers and theological professors, women of the Levee and members of the W.C.T.U., anarchists and professional people sat side by side."¹²⁴ The two-thirty meeting began ominously when Thomas J. Morgan, a socialist, warned the crowd, "If you well-to-do people do not listen . . . a desperate man, feeling in himself all the injustice that is inflicted on his fellows, will kill, will destroy. . . . And if the pleadings of Editor Stead in the name of Christ and for justice cannot shake you out of your false security may somebody use dynamite to blow you out."¹²⁵ A man fled the building, screaming "no dynamite! Christ is enough for me!"¹²⁶ Morgan, although not an anarchist, did

123. "Stead in the Slums." *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1893. The Central Music Hall had been the site of many religious gatherings during the summer, most often led by David Swing. See David Swing, *Echoes from Central Music Hall: Selections from the Recent Sermons of Professor David Swing* (Chicago: Donohue, Henneberry, 1894).

124. "Strong Words Used," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 13, 1893.

125. Ibid.

126. Ibid.

represent the view of many labor activists and the fears of the American public in warning of a violent revolution, a coming judgment, but at the hands of the people, not Christ's.

Stead, too, exhorted the audience to change their ways or face a reckoning, and in doing so, developed the premise for his new book: "O, how sorry I am for Christ. His heart, so full of love for men as ours are not... That is the real cross of Christ. That is the cross which you are fashioning for him in Chicago and we are fashioning for him in London and all are fashioning in whose hearts love is not."¹²⁷ Stead collapsed the time between Christ's first coming and the modern day by claiming that inaction by Christians re-crucified Christ. This unification of past and present allowed Stead to argue that Christ was already in Chicago, just as he had been in Judea and as he would be at the millennium. What Christ would see presented Stead with an opportunity to explain his vision for a more moral future for Chicago and the entire country. He portrayed the city as utterly lacking in morality, the "*cloaca maxima*" of the world, but insisted on "the essential goodness of her citizens, and the magnificent future before the city," should it implement his suggestions for reform.¹²⁸ According to Stead, Chicagoans resisted his message: "We take no stock in Christ in Chicago! He was all very well nineteen hundred years ago in Judea, but what have we to do with Him in civic life in Chicago?"¹²⁹ Stead described the prisons, saloons, and "houses of ill-repute" that Christ would find and then predicted the city's fate after Christ's judgment. He included tales of sordid business deals by the city's elite, the lot of the poorest gambler, episodes of drunkenness and imprisonment, and the bleak reality of young prostitutes. Finally, he laid out his suggestions for civic reform, sparing no harsh words for Chicago's churches, press, or leading citizens.

127. Ibid.

128. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 3, v–vi.

129. Ibid., ix.

The Very Excrescence of Hell

In many ways *If Christ Came to Chicago* was a typical nineteenth-century text, which drew on the British tradition of slum fiction and the American Christian moral novel. Slum fiction of the 1840s and 1850s was meant "to alert readers to the conditions of the slums in hopes of kindling awareness, charity and social reform."¹³⁰ In the 1880s and 1890s, a second generation of slum writers combined investigative journalism, proto-sociology, and "contemporary explorer narratives," typified by books like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.¹³¹ Stead freely used the voyeuristic lens of the explorer genre to gaze at Chicago's own "heart of darkness." The majority of late nineteenth-century travel books, slum fiction, and social reform tracts were unremarkable. Stead's amalgamation of these genres made *If Christ Came to Chicago* dynamic. Stead used the voyeuristic elements of travel books and slum fiction to capture his audience's attention with a tantalizing glimpse at "how the other half lives."¹³² He then used standard moral tropes of fallen women and unfortunate tramps to generate sympathy.

Despite his own sensationalist tendencies, Stead was predominantly concerned with moral reform, which he borrowed from his engagement in American moral realism. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was one of the most widely read examples of this genre. Stead was good friends with Stowe's brother, Henry Ward Beecher, who convinced Stead to share his ideas in America. Other works of moral realism, like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), exposed Chicago's dark side in the decade after Stead published his book. Christian authors

130. Matthew K. McKean, "Rethinking Late-Victorian Slum Fiction: The Crowd and Imperialism at Home," *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920* 54, no. 1 (2011): 28.

131. Ibid., 29, 34.

132. Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, a photographic study of New York tenements, was published in 1890 to instant success.

also turned to realism, such as *In His Steps*, written in 1896 by Charles Sheldon after reading *If Christ Came to Chicago*. These homiletic novels sought to alleviate “parishioners’ enervating doubts about religion’s relevance in an age of industry, mechanization, and scientific advancement” by creating a narrative of daily Christian living.¹³³

In a proto-sociological style, *If Christ Came to Chicago* included a map of the Nineteenth Precinct, with an almost bloody splash of red brothels, to shock and draw the attention of readers, who could read of the Levee’s sensual pleasures at home (Fig. 3). In the first edition, Stead also included an appendix—the infamous “Black List”—with the names of hundreds of saloons and brothels, together with each building’s owner. Uproar over the list, which the Union News company called “blasphemous” and “a directory of sin,” caused two publishers to reject the book.¹³⁴ Stead claimed that the only “shocking outrage upon religion [was] to couple the names of Christ and Chicago!”¹³⁵ Many Chicagoans also objected to the voyeuristic display of their city, even if social reform was the stated goal. A British expatriate named Austyn Granville defended his new home in the cheeky rebuttal, *If the Devil Came to Chicago*. Satan read the Black List but finds nothing of interest in the morally upstanding city.¹³⁶

The book’s apocalyptic premise enchanted some readers and infuriated others. Chicagoans’ hatred for the book guaranteed that it would be read elsewhere, with New Yorkers and other urbanites especially eager to hear

133. Gregory S. Jackson, “‘What Would Jesus Do?’: Practical Christianity, Social Gospel Realism, and the Homiletic Novel,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 2006): 642.

134. “Refuse to Handle Stead’s Book,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 7, 1894. Stead removed the Black List from later editions.

135. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 508.

136. Austyn Granville, *If the Devil Came to Chicago: A Plea for the Misrepresented by One Who Knows What It Is to Be Misrepresented Himself* (Chicago: Bow-Knot, 1894).

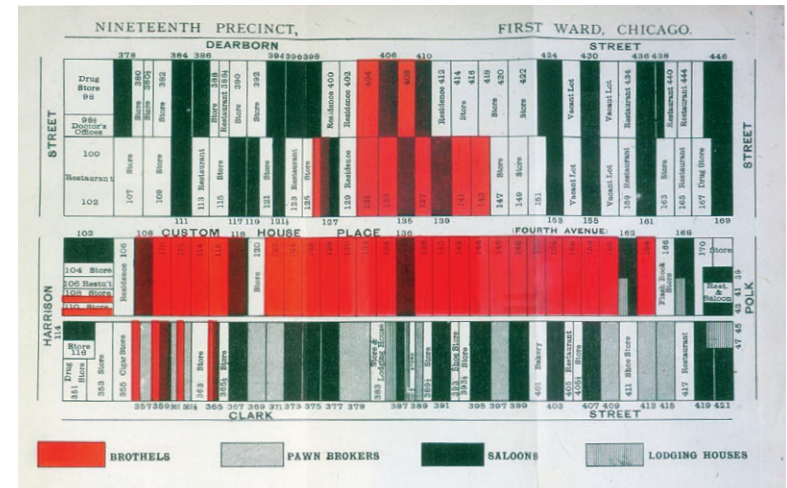


Figure 3: Nineteenth Precinct, First Ward, Chicago, W. T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago!* (London: Review of Reviews, 1894).

tales of Chicago’s shortcomings. A London publication “declared that the Christ Stead envisioned visiting Chicago in his book was ‘not the Christ of the Gospels, but a sort of glorified version of himself.’”¹³⁷ Chicago’s Reverend J. J. Tobias thundered that the book was “the very excrescence of hell and damnable philosophy” in a fiery sermon called, “Hell Up to Date.”¹³⁸ A supporter and Baptist minister, O. P. Gifford considered Stead “a prophet,” while Reverend W. Walsh said Stead “spoke like Jonah at Nineveh.”¹³⁹ One of Stead’s closest observers, Walsh wrote that he “could never quite decide whether Stead was a fraud, a maniac,

137. Quoted in Baylen, 428; Gary Scott Smith, “When Stead Came to Chicago: The Social Gospel Novel and the Chicago Civic Federation,” *American Presbyterians* 68, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 200.

138. “City Council in Hell’s Capital,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 28, 1894.

139. Smith, “When Stead Came to Chicago,” 199.



Figure 4: Frontispiece, W. T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago!* (London: Review of Reviews, 1894).

or an inspired evangelist.”¹⁴⁰ Stead agreed: “If there ever was a demagogue in the world[,] ... I am one.”¹⁴¹

Stead’s manipulations of genres and instinct for controversy were clever. He seized a cultural moment fascinated with spectacle and sensation to create and market his text. However, Stead’s most important innovation was his unification of three major strands of Protestant thinking: Social Gospel for the book’s reform elements, premillennialism for its title, and postmillennial for its hope.

140. *Ibid.*, 202.

141. “Stead for Reform,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1893.

A Collapse of Millennialisms

The book might not have been so memorable if not for its memorable title.¹⁴² “If you were to place the title of this book in one scale,” Stead wrote in a review of his own book, “and all the 450 pages which it contains in the other, I would far rather let the book perish if so be that the title could be engraved upon the memory... There is a whole Gospel in that simple phrase, ‘If Christ came.’”¹⁴³ Stead derived the idea of Christ’s return from the poem, “The Parable,” by the American James Russell Lowell:

Said Christ our Lord, “I will go and see
How the men, my brethren, believe in me.”
He passed not again through the gate of birth,
But made Himself known to the children of earth.¹⁴⁴

Stead believed that his simple query would induce Chicago, indeed the whole world, to eradicate vice and sin and usher in the new millennium.¹⁴⁵ He believed that the “Divine potency” of the phrase would be “the lever which will raise the world and redeem mankind.”¹⁴⁶ This was postmillennialism in its purest form. Human beings, by adopting the image of Christ, could bring about a perfect world. However, Stead claimed that Chicagoans had failed to minister “to the physical, social and moral necessities of our fellow-men” and accused Protestants

142. Stead next publication, which considered Chicago’s labor movement after the Pullman strike, is little remembered even in the most pedantic scholarship of Stead’s life. See W. T. Stead, *Chicago To-Day; or, The Labour War in America* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1894).

143. Stead, “If Christ Came to Chicago,” 508.

144. *Ibid.*, xii; James Russell Lowell, *Poems* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1892), 254.

145. Stead, “If Christ Came to Chicago,” 508.

146. *Ibid.*

specifically of having “succumbed largely to the temptation of ‘being at ease in Zion.’”¹⁴⁷ By this reckoning, Chicago had failed to fulfill both the postmillennial’s moral duty to perfect the world and the Social Gospel movement’s duty to do good works. Ultimately, Stead threatens Chicagoans with the premillennial vision of the wrathful God.

The book’s frontispiece shows Jesus Christ in biblical attire overturning a gambling table frequented by Chicago’s wealthiest citizens (Fig. 4).¹⁴⁸ The Administration Building of the World’s Fair looms in the background and a man not dissimilar to George Pullman struggles to pick up his gold and a train car. The caption is Matthew 21:23: “It is written, my house shall be called the house of prayer; yet ye have made it a den of thieves.” Stead’s ire falls squarely on the shoulders of Chicago’s elites. Premillennialists conventionally directed their ire at the criminalized lower classes, but Stead did not believe they caused the city’s rot: “Prostitution of the conventional kind is, however, a bagatelle compared with the prostitution of justice and honesty and fair dealing which is rampant everywhere in the government of Chicago.”¹⁴⁹ He named Marshall Field, Philip Armour, and George Pullman the “Chicagoan Trinity” and “the syndicate of millionaires which ran the World’s Fair, ... [who] loom up before the eyes of their fellow-men because they have succeeded in ascending a pyramid largely composed of human bones.”¹⁵⁰ The worshippers of Mammon “having accepted Cain’s gospel ... are reaping the consequences.”¹⁵¹ Like the ministers preaching after Carter Harrison’s

147. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago!*, 122, 258.

148. *Ibid.*, frontispiece.

149. *Ibid.*, 511.

150. *Ibid.*, 59, 62–63.

151. *Ibid.*, 178.

assassination, Stead drew comparisons between Chicago and Old Jerusalem, reminding his audience that as Jerusalem was “smote” and “so it is to-day in the city of Chicago.”¹⁵²

If Christ Came to Chicago collapsed all notions of past, present, and future, which makes it is neither premillennial nor postmillennial in the conventional sense. Pre- and postmillennialism have opposite teleologies of history: premillennialism views society as decaying over time, while postmillennialism views society as progressing over time. Stead argues that Christ could visit 1894 Chicago like he had first-century Jerusalem. The provocative frontispiece depicts an event from the Gospel of Matthew in contemporary Chicago: the city is not merely similar to Old Jerusalem, but *is* Old Jerusalem; Pullman, Field, and the like are not merely similar to the Pharisees, they *are* the money changers; and the fair’s Administration Building further situates the scene in the here and now. For Stead, time itself became irrelevant.

Stead was able to collapse pre- and postmillennialism for two reasons. First, the apocalyptic symbolism that had permeated the city since the opening of the World’s Fair was as confusing as Stead’s blended eschatology. The perfect city in flames, the controversial but triumphant mayor cut down, and labor strife permitted Stead to draw on the postmillennial hope of the White City and a premillennial judgment of the Black City’s vice. Secondly, Stead collapsed the trajectory of history. For Stead, the life of Christ, the present day, and the future apocalypse—be it pre- or postmillennial—were all concurrent. Christ’s hypothetical return to Chicago was at once a continuation of the Gospel, a vicious judgment of the present, and a triumphant postmillennial visitation. Stead proclaimed that “the Passion and the Cross are for us day by day and hour by hour, moment by moment. Nor will He cease from dwelling amongst us—the living word made manifest in his flesh—as long as men and women live,

152. *Ibid.*

and love, and sin, and suffer, and go down forlorn into the pit.”¹⁵³ Stead did not have to wonder what would occur if Christ came to Chicago, because He was already there. This collapse of time allowed Stead to hold supposedly incompatible eschatologies.

The dominant strains of theology all failed, in their own ways, to sufficiently mollify the fears of many Chicago Protestants who were trying to understand urban modernity. Progressive and transcendent postmillennialism, though lingering, was a vestige of pre-Civil War America. In a moment of increasing social fracture and anxiety, postmillennialism’s successor, the Social Gospel, failed to provide the recourse to divine justice that premillennialism did. However, the pessimism of premillennialism could not satisfy the needs of a society that believed strongly in American exceptionalism. The pragmatic teleology of the Social Gospel and the pessimistic teleology of premillennialism were incompatible with the continuing dream of the fair. Thus, Chicagoans developed their own hybrid millennialisms.

No doubt, some enjoyed *If Christ Came to Chicago*’s promise of divine justice for capitalists and politicians who profited on the misery of the working classes. Nowhere did Stead condemn the average Chicagoan; he castigated wealthy elites and impotent ecclesiastic institutions, who, naturally, loathed his book. The frontispiece promised more than justice—it promised a spectacle of divine vengeance. Revelry in apocalyptic spectacle was hardly a nineteenth-century innovation in Christian thinking. In *De Spectaculis*, the church father Tertullian beseeched third-century Christians to avoid the Roman circus: “What a spectacle is that fast-approaching advent of our Lord!”¹⁵⁴ Tertullian promised that monarchs and philosophers, poets and actors, would “be consumed in one great flame” during

153. *Ibid.*, 252.

154. Tertullian, “The Shows, *De Spectaculis*,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, vol. 3, trans. S. Thelwall, *The Ante-Nichene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887), 91.

the Second Coming, while he “fix[ed] a gaze insatiable on those whose fury vented itself against the Lord.”¹⁵⁵ To many of Stead’s readers, the specific doctrinal elements of pre- or postmillennialism were less important than the promise of justice and progress that each theology entailed. And most intriguing was the prospect of justice being *spectacular*. Just as late nineteenth-century Chicagoans hungered for the unimaginably grandiose World’s Fair and the marvelous gilded department store of Marshall Field, they found the flames that consumed the pinnacle of the city’s ambition and achievement to be a grand entertainment on par with the fair itself. For all the theological hand-wringing of Chicago’s elite ministers, the majority of the population—the ones who visited the fair on Chicago Day, who frequented saloons and gambling halls, and who read Stead’s Black List with delight—was entertained by the various apocalyptic symbols offered by the modern city. They chased the next grand spectacle and responded to each apocalyptic symbol as it came. ○

155. *Ibid.*

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