

Henry, Sarepta Myrenda (Irish) (1839–1900)

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Sarepta Myrenda Irish (S.M.I.) Henry was a national evangelist for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and became a convert to Seventh-day Adventism in the last years of her life while a patient at Battle Creek Sanitarium. Shortly before her death she pioneered "woman ministry" in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.



Sarepta Myrenda (Irish) Henry.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Early Life, Education, and Marriage

Sarepta Myrenda Irish was born on November 4, 1839, in Albion, Pennsylvania, to Methodist minister Horatio Nelson Irish and his wife, Mary Allis Irish (née Clark). As a child she often accompanied her father in his ministerial work in Illinois. Her brother, Orsamus H. Irish, served in various positions in the federal government, including superintendent of Indian Affairs for Utah under President Abraham Lincoln and as chief of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing under James A. Garfield's administration.¹

As a young woman, Irish found employment as a teacher. In 1859 she enrolled at the Rock River Seminary in Mount Morris, Illinois.² While she was there, a close friend introduced her to James W. Henry, a teacher. They married in 1861 and lived briefly in northwestern Iowa.³ Both Sarepta and James had abolitionist sympathies, and James volunteered for the Union Army in 1864.⁴ In 1871 James died abruptly from an illness. The couple had three children who survived into adulthood, their fourth and youngest child dying just months after James.⁵

Henry supported herself and her children after James's death by publishing stories and poetry.

Career/Ministry

In 1874, alarmed to find that her young son Arthur had been lured into a saloon, Henry organized a local temperance society in Rockford, Illinois. She subsequently became involved with the recently organized Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Though she had been shy and reserved as a young woman, she eventually took the position of a national evangelist for the organization. The cause of temperance became her lifelong passion.

Henry suffered from various ailments throughout her life. In the summer of 1896 she entered John Harvey Kellogg's Battle Creek Sanitarium for an enlarged heart that had left her bedridden since the late 1880s. Physicians had offered a diagnosis that she would never be released from her wheelchair, but Henry experienced miraculous healing after an anointing session with A. T. Jones, W. W. Prescott, several physicians, and two other patients on April 13, 1897. Drs. Kellogg and Laretta Kress confirmed her miraculous recovery. It was also during her time at the sanitarium that Henry became a Seventh-day Adventist. Following her recovery she shared her testimony with an audience of 2,500 in the Battle Creek Tabernacle, one of the many large public meetings, church gatherings, and evangelistic campaigns at which she spoke before and after her conversion.⁶

Beginning in 1880, WCTU president Frances Willard adopted a "do-everything" policy that expanded the organization's work into other realms of moral reform, including Sunday observance.⁷ In 1884 the organization created a Department of Effort to Prevent Sabbath Desecration, otherwise known as the Sabbath Observance Department, which quickly entangled itself in advocacy for a national Sunday law (Sunday was often termed "Sabbath" by its observers). Henry was initially supportive of the department for its efforts to secure a day of rest for child laborers.⁸ At the WCTU's convention in Buffalo, New York, in late 1897, however, Henry publicly presented a memorial signed by approximately thirteen thousand women requesting the dissolution of the department or an abandonment of its lobby for Sunday legislation and compulsory observance.⁹ WCTU leaders received the memorial, but did not grant her request. The following year Henry tendered her resignation from her post as a national evangelist because of her differences with the organization over its Sunday law advocacy. The national officers refused to accept her resignation and offered her the opportunity to present her case at the next annual convention.

Henry learned of Ellen G. White's gift of prophecy after her conversion to Seventh-day Adventism but was not immediately convinced. As she wrote in a column in the short-lived periodical *The Gospel of Health* in 1898, she was mistakenly led to believe at first that the church had elevated White's testimonies to the same authority as Scripture. Henry came to accept White's gift while attending the Medical Missionary Convention at the Chicago Medical Missionary Training School in December 1897.¹⁰ Though they never met—White was in Australia at the time, and Henry in the United States—the two women took up a warm, close correspondence that would last

until the end of Henry's life.

In 1898 White wrote to Henry as she was preparing to resign from the WCTU, urging her against such an action: "The Lord does not bid you separate from the Women's Christian Temperance Union."¹¹ White had offered words of caution regarding popular temperance movements that sacrificed the important issue of temperance for theatricality and showmanship.¹² But in her correspondence with Henry she stressed the opportunities that Henry had to reach the women of the WCTU, particularly with the truth about the Sabbath, without compromising Seventh-day Adventist principles. White wrote emphatically that it was not God's will for her to resign at the present time.¹³

Henry's efforts to dissolve the Sabbath Observance Department of the WCTU were not realized in her lifetime. However, following the 1899 convention in Seattle the organization drew up a resolution favoring the amendment of state Sunday laws so that they exempted seventh-day Sabbathkeepers.¹⁴ Furthermore, following her conversion, Henry conducted a letter-writing campaign to hundreds of WCTU members and other persons of influence with the assistance of her stenographer. These letters were often accompanied with her tract "How the Sabbath Came to Me" (1897).¹⁵ Because of her personal efforts a large number of WCTU members discontinued their advocacy for Sunday laws. Some also accepted the doctrine and practice of observing the seventh-day Sabbath.¹⁶

In the meantime the question Henry's public ministry, which included sharing about the seventh-day Sabbath and the testimony of her conversion to Seventh-day Adventism, came to the attention of the General Conference leadership. They recognized the scope of her work and that her tract on the Sabbath had attracted a large interest. The General Conference Committee voted to supply her with missionary credentials on March 25, 1897, though they subsequently decided that they could not pay for a full-time stenographer for her work!¹⁷

At the General Conference Committee's meeting in Battle Creek on March 18, 1898, Henry presented her work with the WCTU. She expressed that "she needed to have something from the General Conference that would place her and her work properly before the denomination." The committee, impressed that her work with the WCTU and religious liberty was "of no ordinary character," voted to have a subcommittee evaluate how best to confer her with greater credibility within the denomination.¹⁸ At their meeting on March 30 they voted to grant her a ministerial license, "which would be more in keeping with her line of work."¹⁹ The General Conference Committee also voted Henry as a delegate to the General Conference of Seventh Day Baptists.²⁰

Her talent for leadership lagging no less after her conversion, Henry crafted plans for "woman ministry" in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In a supplement to the December 6, 1898, issue of the *Review and Herald*, she exhorted women to a more active role in the church life and in personal ministry to other women. Ellen White's letter to Henry dated to earlier that year regarding the role of women in evangelism was printed alongside Henry's essay. In the letter, White wrote, "There certainly should be a larger number of women engaged in the work of ministering to suffering humanity, uplifting, educating them how to believe—simply believe—in Jesus

Christ our Savior.”²¹ Church historian Arthur Whitefield Spalding later wrote that Henry led “the first semblance of an organized effort to train parents and to give help in their problems.”²² In print and in public presentations across the United States and Canada, Henry drew attention to the role of the mother in rearing children and in society.

From her college years Henry was known to be skilled as a poet. She published her work on a semi-regular basis, at first under the nom de plume Lina Linwood.²³ Throughout her life she authored several publications on religious and temperance topics. Among her many works were *The Marble Cross and Other Poems*, which the WCTU published in 1886. Her publications after she joined the Adventist Church included “How the Sabbath Came to Me” (1897), *Studies in Home and Child Life* (1898), *A Woman-Ministry, or The Gospel in the Home* (1899), *The Unanswered Prayer, or Why Do So Many Children of the Church Go to Ruin?* (1889), and *Good Form and Christian Etiquette* (1900). She had two unpublished manuscripts, “Childhood Types and Conditions” and “Out of the Mine,” at the time of her death. She also wrote a regular column titled Woman’s Gospel Work that ran in the *Review and Herald* for approximately two years until shortly after her passing.

Henry was also influenced by the holiness movement within Adventism (approximately 1892 to 1901), particularly the “Receive Ye the Holy Ghost” emphasis promoted by A. T. Jones and A. F. Ballenger.²⁴ She published *The Abiding Spirit* (1898), a book about the Holy Spirit that drew from her presentations on the healing of the soul and body. Though published and advertised in denominational periodicals by the *Review and Herald*, the press later pulled it from the market for some of its similarities to the theology in John Harvey Kellogg’s *The Living Temple* (1903).²⁵

Legacy

While attending a meeting in Graysville, Tennessee, Henry suddenly caught the flu, which developed into pneumonia and pleurisy. She died there on January 16, 1900.²⁶ Her funeral was held at the Battle Creek Tabernacle, and she was buried by her parents in Pecatonica, Illinois. While her “woman ministry” was carried on for a time by her secretary, Grace Durland, and other women after her death, it did not last long.

Henry’s daughter, Mary Henry Rossiter, remembered her mother in a biography titled *My Mother’s Life: The Evolution of a Recluse*, published in 1900 by Fleming H. Revell Company, with an introduction by Bishop John H. Vincent of the Methodist-Episcopal Church. Her granddaughter Margaret Rossiter White-Thiele, who married Ellen G. White’s grandson James Henry White, wrote a biographical account titled *Whirlwind of the Lord: The Story of Mrs. S.M.I. Henry* (1953). She based the book on Henry’s publications, Rossiter’s book, personal family papers, and reminiscences of Grace Mace (née Durland).

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14. Rossiter, 324.
15. G.A. Irwin, S.M.I. Henry folder, incoming presidential correspondence file, General Conference Archives; letter book, S.M.I. Henry outgoing correspondence file, General Conference Archives.

16. This statement is substantiated by letters from women reporting back to Henry about the effect of her tract on them. G.A. Irwin, S.M.I. Henry folder, incoming presidential correspondence file, General Conference Archives.
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