

Early English Hymnody

Introduction

When England split from the Catholic Church to form the Church of England under the reign of Henry VIII, the transition was "neither sudden nor painless."¹ The musical style that came to the fore after the schism for worship in English churches was the metrical psalm, after the Calvinist tradition. In 1561, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, a widely accepted metrical psalter was released, containing the *Veni creator spiritus* translated into English, versions of most of the Prayer Book canticles, the Athanasian Creed, Lord's Prayer and Commandments and six original hymns.² Other common metrical psalters included one by Sternhold and Hopkins, completed in 1562, and the Bay Psalm Book, which was published in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1640.³ The basic philosophy of metrical psalmody can be found in the introduction of the Bay Psalm Book, which states "if therefore the verses are not always so smoother and elegant as some may desire or expect; let them consider that God's Altar needs not our polishings...for we have respected rather a plain translation, than to smooth our verses with the sweetness of any paraphrase."⁴ Thus, until the beginning of the eighteenth century, few hymns existed until one man and two brothers came on the scene: Isaac Watts, and John and Charles Wesley.

¹ Elwyn A. Wienandt, *Choral Music of the Church* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 139.

² Nicholas Temperley, "The English hymn before the Wesleyan revival" *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (accessed 20 April 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

³ Robin A. Leaver, "The Hymn Explosion," *Christian History* 10, no. 3:14. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 21, 2008).

⁴*The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre*, Preface (Cambridge: Stephen Daye, 1640), quoted in *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings*, by David W. Music (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), 90.

Isaac Watts: Father of English Hymnody

In 1674, Isaac Watts was born to a family of Dissenters. In fact, when Watts was born, his father "was in prison for his Nonconformist sympathies [or his unwillingness to] embrace the established Church of England."⁵ Growing up, Watts often complained about how poor the music in church was. The story goes that when he was twenty years old, Watts "complained about the quality of the songs [in church], and his father challenged him to write something better."⁶ A week later, he introduced his first hymn to the church.⁷

Moving away from literal adaptations of Scripture, Watts began a reformation of "congregational song texts, based on the fundamental principle that church song should express the thoughts and feelings of the singers."⁸ Watts had five main arguments for improving upon and changing English hymnody from the traditional metrical psalm. He was first concerned for the improvement of the poetic quality of the psalms used in worship. Second, he felt that psalms and hymns should properly reveal the insights of the author to produce a spiritual response in the congregation. He then believed that interpreting Old Testament psalms by New Testament theology could induce such insights and responses. Fourth, all Scripture should be interpreted in contemporary

⁵ Vinita Hampton Wright, "The hymn writers' hall of fame," *Christian History* 10, no. 3:20, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 21, 2008).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Temperley, "The English hymn before the Wesleyan revival."

terms. Finally, congregational song should not be solely confined to biblical psalms, but also include hymns freely composed on biblical themes.⁹

In his lifetime, Watts produced three hymn collections, *Horae lyricae* in 1705, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1707, and *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* in 1719.¹⁰ In the preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Watts upholds his argument for better music in worship services, saying "while we sing the Priases of our God in his Church, we are employ'd in that part of Worship which...is the nearest a-kin to Heaven; and 'tis pity that this of all others should be perform'd the worst upon Earth."¹¹ Watts was often troubled by the method in which psalms were sung in worship, which was called lining-out. In this method, the song leader "would read or sing one line of the psalm, which would then be sung by the congregation."¹² To ward against the tediousness and inability to follow the whole message of the psalms, Watts suggests in the preface to *The Psalms of David* that the clerk, or song leader, "read the whole Psalm over aloud before he begins to parcel out the Lines, that the People may have some Notion of what they sing."¹³

Many of Isaac Watts' hymns are still enjoyed by congregations today, include "Joy to the World," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "I Sing the Almighty

⁹ Leaver.

¹⁰ Temperley, "The English hymn before the Wesleyan revival."

¹¹ Isaac Watts, Preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (London: J. Humphreys, for John Lawrence, 1707), pp. iii-xiv, quoted in *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings* by David W. Music (London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), 115.

¹² Leaver.

¹³ Isaac Watts, Preface to *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (London: Printed for J. Clark, R. Ford, and R. Cruttenden, 1719), pp. iii-xxxii, quoted in *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings* by David W. Music (London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), 137.

Power of God."¹⁴ Though he is often referred to as the Father of English Hymnody, Erik Routley refers to Isaac Watts as "the liberator of the English hymn."¹⁵ By making new innovations on congregational song, Watts opened the door for other hymn writers, including Charles Wesley, co-founder of the Methodist movement.

Charles Wesley: Preacher and Poet

In 1707, Charles Wesley was born to Samuel and Susannah Wesley, the eighteenth of their nineteen children.¹⁶ The gift of verse ran in the Wesley family, beginning with their father, Samuel Wesley, and appearing in at least of five of his children.¹⁷ During his years at Oxford University, Charles and some of his friends formed a society, later led by his brother John, which focused on spiritual growth through daily Bible study, regular prayer times, fasting two days a week, and participation in evangelism and charitable works.¹⁸ This group went by several names, such as Bible Moths and Holy Clubbers, but the name that stuck was the Methodists. In 1735, John and Charles Wesley journeyed to the Georgia colony to evangelize the Indians and residents of the colony, but returned realizing that they themselves were in need of conversion.¹⁹ A year later, Charles, in his sickbed, had a spiritual experience in which he was convinced of his salvation and claimed to have "found myself at peace with God,

¹⁴ Wright.

¹⁵ Leaver.

¹⁶ Jim Townsend, "The forgotten Wesley," *Christian History* 10, no. 3: 6, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 21, 2008).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ William J. Whalen, "What make a Methodist?" *U.S. Catholic* 60, no. 5:21, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 21, 2008).

¹⁹ Townsend.

and rejoice in hope of loving Christ."²⁰ Two days later, John Wesley arrived where his brother was staying and having experienced his own conversion in Aldersgate Street, and the Methodist movement was begun.²¹

The Wesley brothers aimed to make hymns "the central feature of their worship...[and] designed their hymns...chiefly for the lower classes."²² It is thought that Charles wrote approximately 8,989 hymns in his lifetime, which some have estimated is about ten lines of verse a day for fifty years.²³ The Moravians and Isaac Watts influenced Charles' early hymns, but his verse clearly draws from other influences later in life, including Milton, Pope, Prior, Dryden, and Shakespeare. In fact, his "Love divine, all loves excelling" can be seen as an imitation of Dryden's "Fairest Isle, all Isles excelling."²⁴ Another reason for the timelessness of Wesley's hymns comes from the way his mind was "steeped in Scripture."²⁵ As the foundation of the Christian faith, hymns based on Scripture do not fade away "like those that marry the spirit of the age, to become a widow within a generation."²⁶

Though his hymn writing was not as prolific as that of Charles, John Wesley played an important role in Methodist hymnody by keeping "a tight control over the hymn singing of his movement, and [laying] down the tunes to be used and the manner of

²⁰ Townsend

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nicholas Temperley, "The modern English hymn," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 21 April 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

²³ Townsend.

²⁴ Timothy Dudley-Smith, "Why Wesley still dominates our hymnbook," *Christian History* 10, no. 3:9, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 21, 2008).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

singing them as well as the texts."²⁷ In fact, Wesley's rules for singing included 1. Sing *all*, 2. Sing *lustily* and with good courage, 3. Sing *modestly*, 4. Sing *in time*, and 5. Above all, sing *spiritually*.²⁸ John Wesley compiled many songbooks for the Methodist societies, including *Sacred Melody* and *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*.²⁹ In many of these collections, Charles would not allow people to know which hymns were his and which were his brother John's, but it is thought that almost ninety-three percent of the hymns used in John Wesley's hymn compilations were written by Charles.³⁰ Some of the most famous hymns written by Charles Wesley that are still sung in churches today are "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "Jesus Lover of My Soul," "And Can It Be," and "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

²⁷ Temperley, "The modern English hymn."

²⁸ John Wesley, "Directions for Congregational Singing" from *Sacred Melody* (1761) found in *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings* by David W. Music (London: Scarecrow Press Inc., 1996), 139-40.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Dudley-Smith.