

Isaac Watts.

IN common with Christians of many communions Baptists unite with Congregationalists in gratefully commemorating the bi-centenary of the death of Isaac Watts, which took place on November 25th, 1748. His achievements in the realm of English hymnody are rivalled only by those of Charles Wesley, and never a Sunday passes, but that a host of Christian worshippers sing "the glories of the Lamb" in one or other of the immortal hymns which Watts bequeathed to the Church of God.

The son of a schoolmaster who suffered imprisonment for his convictions as a Dissenter, Isaac Watts was born in Southampton in 1674 and was educated at the local Grammar School and at the Stoke Newington Academy. For a while he was a tutor in the family of Sir John Hartopp, a prominent London Independent layman. Then, in 1702, having been for three years a part-time assistant to Dr. Isaac Chauncey, Watts succeeded the latter as pastor of the Mark Lane (later, Bury Street) Independent chapel. Although ill-health compelled him to restrict his physical activities from as early as 1703 onwards and in later years permitted only occasional appearances in the pulpit, his congregation were so devoted to him that they would not hear of his resigning, and he remained their senior minister until his death in the home of Sir Thomas Abney in 1748. If feeble health affected his bodily frame it did not interfere unduly with his intellectual life, for his literary output was prolific. More than forty theological and philosophical works and about seven hundred and fifty hymns came from his pen. Although it may be suspected that Watts preferred to regard himself as a theologian rather than as a writer of hymns, his prose works now lie forgotten on library shelves; and it is for his hymns, the best of which are deeply loved and fervently sung by Christian congregations the world over, that his memory is cherished in all the churches today, two hundred years after his death.

Even as a boy Isaac Watts had the habit of expressing himself in verse, frequently incurring the disapproval of his puritanical father. But his career as a hymn-writer began at the age of twenty-one when, one Sunday returning home from a service, he criticised the psalm-book used by the congregation and complained that in the verses which had been sung there was neither dignity nor beauty. Whereupon his father remarked that

he had better compose some himself. Rising to the challenge Isaac sat down, upon reaching home, to produce in due course the hymn which begins,

Behold the glories of the Lamb
Amidst His Father's throne;
Prepare new honours for His name,
And songs before unknown.

Thus began from his fertile pen the flow of sacred songs which was eventually to revolutionise and immeasurably enrich English public worship. His first volume of verse, the *Horae Lyricae*, was published when he was thirty-one years old. The *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* appeared two years later, the *Divine and Moral Songs* in 1715 and the *Psalms of David* in 1719. In two or three later works further hymns are to be found. It was the appearance of *Horae Lyricae* which caused Dr. Johnson to include an essay on Watts in his *Lives of the Poets*, in which the great critic declared, "As a poet, had he been only a poet, he would probably have stood high among the authors with whom he is now associated . . . but his devotional poetry, is, like that of others, unsatisfactory . . . It is sufficient for Watts to have done better than others what no man has done well." To what extent Johnson's judgement has been reversed by posterity practically every Christian worshipper in this country knows. It is interesting to note that not only did Watts' best hymns appear in the earliest years of his hymn-writing career but that, although continuing to write prose works, he ceased composing hymns for some unaccountable reason a number of years before he died.

It has been said that the hymns of Watts descended upon the churches "like showers of rain on the parched earth" for, while there had been great preachers and memorable sermons and the gift of prayer of a high order had long been enjoyed in the churches, their spiritual songs were so inferior as to be completely unworthy. The hymns of the ancient Church as well as those of the Lutherans seem to have been unknown in Watts' time and congregations had to make do with the uncouth metrical psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins and the rough pedestrian lines of Tate and Brady's "New Version" of the psalms. One or two pioneers like Benjamin Keach had written hymns, as distinct from the paraphrases, for the use of congregations, but comparatively little progress had been made. There was, in fact, considerable controversy as to whether it was right for hymns other than paraphrases to be sung, while in some churches there was even an objection to singing the psalms. Watts' efforts were not as eagerly welcomed as some historians appear to suggest, but in due course their use by Wesley and Whitefield caused them to be ever more

widely accepted. It was on the sweeping tide of revival, with its need of an outlet for the praises of the saved, that Watts' psalms and hymns were carried into the worship of congregations and the hearts of the people. Indeed, such a hold did they eventually secure that his version of the psalms was retained in several churches, to the exclusion of his hymns, at the end of the eighteenth century, while in other churches, even in the nineteenth century, there were worshippers who remained stubbornly in their seats when other men's compositions were to be sung and stood up to sing only when one of Watts' hymns was announced. Few, if any, will question B. L. Manning's statement that, "to Watts more than any other man, is due the triumph of the hymn in English worship. All later hymn-writers, even when they excel him, are his debtors." It was he who gave to Christian song the place it now enjoys in the worship of the churches in this and other lands. Moreover, he inspired many more to follow his own example and thus placed the churches in his imperishable debt by opening the gates to a stream of hymnody which restored, in an age of Reason, the emotional aspect of worship to its rightful place and set on the lips of the believing community sacred songs that have given expression to this day to the honour, blessing and praise they would ascribe to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Many of Watts' verses were admittedly inferior and sometimes nothing more than doggerel, but the fact remains that it was he who left to the Church the glorious, living legacy of *O God, our help in ages past, Before Jehovah's awful throne, Jesus shall reign where'er the sun, Come let us join our cheerful songs, I'll praise my Maker with my breath, I'm not ashamed to own my Lord* and many others, not least the incomparable *When I survey the wondrous Cross* which many believe to be the greatest hymn in the English tongue. As a recent writer has stated, "At his best Watts deals with the greatest themes of Christian experience, of 'ruin, redemption and regeneration,' with a depth of conviction, a grace and dignity, and a cosmic range and sweep, which few hymn-writers have ever equalled, much less surpassed."¹ Based upon the Bible his hymns deal with those mighty acts of God which constitute the heart and centre of the Christian Gospel. Again and again they celebrate the glories of the life, death and resurrection of the Saviour of mankind and His deliverance of the lost out of darkness into the light of the knowledge of God. This strikes one as a little surprising when one recalls that Watts has often been accused of theological unorthodoxy. But whatever defects may have existed from the point of view of orthodoxy in his other writings, everyone who reads or sings his hymns is brought face to face with the great central affirmations

¹ Prof. N. V. Hope, *Expository Times*, July 1948.

of the faith once delivered to the saints. Silvester Horne once expressed the fear that churches would take their theology from their hymns, and it is probably true that it is from this source that the average congregation derives its theology more than from any other. But concern for the purity and safety of the true faith is far more likely to be aroused by the spectacle of congregations indulging in the intensely subjective strains in which some worshippers still delight; or, on the other hand, in the spiritually anæmic sentiments about sunsets and birds of many a modern hymn, than in blessing the sacred Name through the medium of the magnificent, objective and thoroughly scriptural verses of such as Isaac Watts.

As Watts himself once declared, "While we sing the praises of God in His Church we are employed in that part of worship which of all others is nearest akin to heaven," for on the wings of the noblest hymns the thoughts and feelings of the worshippers are uplifted toward the throne of God. Therefore, across the gulf of two hundred years Christian men salute the memory of Isaac Watts for his unique contribution to English hymnody, and not least, for disposing through his psalms and hymns their minds and hearts toward the Eternal God in a manner that expresses the depths of Christian experience and makes for worship that is pure and acceptable. Consequently, whereas the diminutive body of Isaac Watts was laid to rest in Bunhill Fields two centuries ago, his great soul goes marching on in the praises of those who, like him, would join their cheerful songs with angels round the throne.

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