Robert Bridges Hymn Writer

Treasure No 18: Robert Bridges, Hymn Writer by R. A. Moody:
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Robert Bridges was a hymn-writer in revolt. He produced his major works in the field of hymnody, the essay *A Practical Discourse* on some Principles of Hymn Singing, and *The Yattendon Hymnal* because of a deep dissatisfaction with the hymns of his day. To understand the nature of his work we must look briefly at his theory. Bridges begins the *Practical Discourse* by quoting Augustine on his emotions when first he heard the hymns of Ambrose sung at Milan with this he contrasts the experiences of the sensitive worshiper when he met contemporary hymnody. The need for reform was obvious, and Bridges laid the chief blame on the music, because this in his opinion conditioned the mood of the hymn more than the words. As the object of the outward form of a hymn is to assist the singer to a correct emotion, to obtain some criteria for selecting tunes, he proceeds to examine the emotions which hymns for public singing should contain, and divides them into three classes. The first is Joy, Praise, and Adoration, with the more remote Awe, Peace and Contemplation. The second class is Prayer. The Third is Faith which relates to hymns of Commemoration and Narration and Doctrine. The emotions he will not allow are the personal and subjective, such as Lament, Contrition and Humiliation, and here he includes almost in parody, Self-devotion and Satisfaction. Whose emotion is the hymn to inspire or heighten? The common man even the man below the average, of narrow or vulgar mind. But the music which offends the sensitive was put into the hymn book for just such a man. This is a practical objection of some force since the music which Bridges was trying to restore was related to the popular taste of its time. The history of church music is the history of the adaptations of secular techniques, and the art of the time has a living relation to the generation which produces it. But he saves himself at the eleventh hour from "renouncing art to be in touch with the music halls" by introducing an arbitrary criterion, that the music must be dignified as well as suitable to the meaning. We require then music which is at once dignified, sacred and popular; and the characteristics of such music is dignified melody. We must say in respect of the theory of emotions, as he calls them, that Bridges had in mind the worst possible conditions of hymn singing and quite general use: he allows to small, united bodies and to missions a greater choice. In his own collection there are many hymns which do not conform to the strictest canons he has set. The latter part of the Practical Discourse is concerned with reviewing in historical order the sources from which such music as he requires should be taken.

The earliest class of tune is that of plainsong. He found it necessary to defend this in a fashion which sounds strange now. The modes of plainsong are more suited to melodic as the modern scale is to harmonic purposes. The rhythms of music like the rhythms of speech are of infinite variety, and the unbarred music accommodates itself to the voice and the sense. Bridges is scornful of the

efforts of the earlier revivers of plainsong. The next group of tunes is that of the Reformation hymns. Here he eulogises the work of Bourgeois: so highly does he regard him that he is disposed to ascribe to him any fine melody in any sixteenth century psalter. Gibbons he praises highly while lamenting the procrustean uniformality of rhythm imposed on his tunes in current hymn books. Then there are the German chorales, where he remarks a certain fondness. At the end of the seventeenth century come Jeremiah Clark and William Croft and there for Bridges hymnody comes to a stop to begin again reluctantly at the end of the nineteenth century. The popular school of Lord Mornington with its "diatonic flow, with tediously orthodox modulation, overburdened with conditional graces" in the eighteenth century, and that of the nineteenth century with its "profuse employment of pathetic chords" he quickly dismisses. While the technique of art is developing the art is impersonal because the artists are exploring the techniques. Then when the technique is established, individual personality begins to impress the work. This is not wrong as long as the personality is reserved and vital, but mannerisms are to be rejected.

If it is indifferent to religion whether music is employed in worship, it does not follow that it is a matter of indifference what music is employed. There is no escape from art: the only way of retreat is through levels more obvious in their artificiality. The music heard in churches should be different from music that can be heard elsewhere: it should be fitted to its purpose in dignity, beauty and peace, and its reserve should express the awe of the sanctuary. We may sum up his principles in two brief quotations:

> "The more general the singing, the more general and simple should be the emotion."
> "The music must express the words or sense: it should not attract too much attention to itself: it should be dignified: and its reason and use is to heighten religious emotion."

The *Practical Discourse* had by way' of a footnote an announcement of the forthcoming *Yattendon Hymnal*. Three parts of twenty five hymns each had already been published in 1895, 1897 and 1898. The *Yattendon Hymnal* was initially intended as a choir book for Yattendon parish church, but it look shape very slowly and became an essay in a reformed hymnody on Bridges principles. As the *Practical Discourse* was published in 1899 in the first number of *The Journal of Theological Studies* while the sheets of the last of the four parts of the Hymnal were in the press, it may be considered the final statement of the principles which governed the making of the *Hymnal*. Bridges removed to Yattendon in 1882; for some years he trained the choir and gathered together a number of settings of words from *Hymns Ancient and Modern* for their use. When he gave up his office he resolved to print some of these and from this grew the Hymnal. As the work progressed and Bridges wished to include more tunes, he became aware of a difficulty, that there were no suitable words for many of the tunes. After searching for likely words he began to translate and later to write original paraphrases and hymns. His first hymn, the only original hymn in the first part, appears diffidently enough with the numbers of possible alternative words. Of the forty-eight hymns in the *Hymnal* which are substantially by Bridges, three are in the first part, fourteen in the second, fifteen in the third, and sixteen in the fourth. As we might expect the music is the primary ground of selection. Classing the tunes loosely, there are thirteen plainsongs, sixteen psalm tunes from Geneva, seven tunes by Tallis, eight by Gibbons, eight other psalm tunes from the sixteenth century, and ten from the seventeenth, eleven German chorales, nine tunes by Clark, and four by Croft, three miscellaneous eighteenth century tunes, and one early Italian one. His gesture to his own time was to include seven tunes by his friend Wooldridge.

All Bridges' hymns are primarily 'carriers'; that it, each was written to bring into use a particular tune. The beginnings of his hymns are in an outward necessity, and not in the irrepressibility of devotion. For this reason he preferred to translate or adapt where he could: often he began upon the

foundation of the original hymn and after the first verse found the music suggesting or inspiring or conditioning the remainder. Bridges was impeccable in the technique of verse and very sensible of the mood of a tune. His hymns are not infrequently theologically uncertain, but technically they are sure. The shape and the content of all the hymns are determined by the needs of their tunes, but as long as the words were true to the tune, minor discrepancies of quantity and accent did not concern him. The custom of putting expression marks beside the verses of a hymn offended him greatly: the sense of the words and music command their own mood without an artificial control thrust on them from without.

The hymns from the Latin are generally quite faithful translations. There is some indication that they belong to an earlier period than their place in the *Hymnal* suggests. They are not uniformly excellent. Five hymns are attributed to St. Ambrose or his school, and three to Gregory. Of these the best is *O Splendour of God's glory bright* from Splendor Paternae gloriae. The last verse has an unhappy line of faded imagery—'Morn in her rosy ear is borne'—Which mars the hymn. The other seven hymns it must be admitted are rather pedestrian and unlikely to supersede other translations. The mediaeval hymns are much more felicitous. Superna matris guadia of Adam of St. Victor appears as *Love of the Father, Love of God the Son* from Amor Patris et Filii to Gibbons' Song 22 is another outstanding success. This hymn expresses much of Bridges' own faith in his own terms:

Purest and Highest, Wisest and most Just.
There is no truth save only in Thy trust:
Thou dost the mind from earthly dreams recall,
And bring, thro' Christ, to Him for Whom are all.

Jesu, how sweet the thought, of Thee invites comparison with ether versions of *Jesu dulcis memoria*, in which comparison Bridge comes put well. Here are the fourth and fifth verses:

Jesu, Thou king of highest best,
Whose triumph hath the world possest,
Exceeding sweetness unexprest,
All-loving, loved and loveliest.

There is no tongue can tell of this.
No book that writeth not amiss,
To love Thee, Jesu, what it is
He may believe who hath the bliss.

He has preserved the fourfold rime of the original The fourth verse is excellent in its archaic simplicity, though this age of the vernacular would no doubt be shy of singing it. But this quality over-reaches itself in the. next verse and tumbles in the last line. Caswall and Neale, while lacking freshness and the exquisiteness of some of Bridges' phrases also lack his calculated simplicity. *Come, O Creator Spirit, come*, his version of *Veni Creator Spiritus* is nearer to the original than either Dryden's or Cosin's versions and has obtained wide use. *O Maker of the stars of night* is a successful version of *Conditor alme*. Here is the last verse :

We pray Thee, Holiest, Who shall come
To be our Judge on day of doom,
Preserve us in our trial brief
From all that then might bring us grief

This verse, illustrates a character of style, a certain naiveté, almost a superficial resemblance to doggerel, from which very few of these translations from the Latin are altogether free. The obvious inversion of the adjective in the third line, the omission of the article in the second line, the structure of the last line are all easy to hand. There is much to be said for this in hymns which have to be sung many times: verbal experiments wear thin in use, but the simple and even obvious phrases take a high polish with handling. The last hymn from a Latin original is *Happy are they, they that love God* from Coffin. This is so reconstructed as to be almost an original hymn for Croft's BINCHESTER. The first three stanzas of the original are freely translated and the fourth is replaced by two new verses. This is one of the three most widely reprinted hymns from the *Yattendon Hymnal* and needs no quotation.

There are only two hymns from Greek original and both are evening hymns and both are set to Genevan tunes. *Darkening night the land doth cover* is from a hymn in Andrewes's *Preces Privatae*. It is an excellent hymn and deserves to be more widely known.

Darkening night the land doth cover:
Day is over:
We give thanks, O Thou most High:
While with wonted hymn we' adore Thee,
And implore Thee
For the light that doth not die.

There are certain recurrent images in Bridges' hymns, indeed in all his works: an evening of joy and peace is one of the most frequent of them. A cosmic content broods over the Christian man. The other hymn is *O gladsome light, O grace* which is very well known.

The translations from German are the most numerous. The very first in the Hymnal is *Now cheer our hearts this eventide* for its proper tune. *Ah, holy Jesu, how hast Thou offended* and *O sacred Head sore wounded* were both translated from Latin originals but with the approach of the German versions, and for German tunes. These two hymns are really above praise: they are exceptional among English hymns for the nature of their personal feeling for the Passion. In most English hymns on the Cross, it is God who suffers and the hymn is directed through the figure on the Cross to God. In these two hymns it is God Incarnate who is worshipped. Bridges who was very careful to exclude both enthusiasm and false sentiment has attempted a difficult task here and has produced two hymns of great worth and beauty because he has succeeded. *The duteous day now closeth* from Gerhardt is another of the most popular three. It begins with a noble and free translation of two stanzas of the German and ends with two that are original. *Jesu, best and dearest* is not so free from the excesses of pietism in the later verses, but it has fine phrases. There are three German hymns in the spirit of Luther. *Now all give thanks to God* is a much freer translation of Nun danket alle Gott than the popular version of Miss Winkworth which it is not likely to displace although its second verse is preferable to that of hers.

O may his bounteous love
Thro'out this life befriend us,
And ever cheerful hearts
And holy concord send us:
His grace our spirits hear
Thro' vanities unvext,
And shield from ill whate'er,
In this world and the next.

All my hope on God is founded translated for its proper tune is a very fine hymn to a difficult metre, too well known to need quotation There is an originality of phrase about Bridges' work which is very refreshing at the end of last century although he has since had his followers and imitators. *Fear not, thou faithful Christian flock* for the Thirty-sixth Genevan Psalm is a good hymn marred by the histrionic apostrophe occurring in both verses—Arise! Arise! the foe defy! The last of the German hymns is *When morning gilds the skies*. At sixty lines this is the longest but one of Bridges' hymns. Here are some of his couplets:

By night my heart will sigh,
If sleepless then I lie,
When worldly things I rue,
This hymn doth hope renew,
Whate'er my hands begin,
This blessing breaketh in,
May Jesus Christ be praised.

They compare favourably with Caswall's version with its balm and bliss, which with the passage of time have acquired the false sweetness of saccharine.

There are ten adaptations from English originals: we will examine only the literary aspect of the alterations, but there are also certain theological considerations. *O Prince of Peace, who man wast born* is a condensation of seventy-two lines into twenty, which preserves the mood of the fifteenth century original and its refrain and a little of its archaism. *The king, O God, his heart to Thee upraiseth* is an adaptation of an old version of Psalm 21, headed Coronation Hymn. The type of hymn proper to state occasions is congenial to Bridges style: it is a noble adaptation to a grave Bourgeois melody, and in some ways recalls two other hymns by men of his generation, Kipling's Recessional and Chesterton's "O God of earth and altar". Here is the same sense of God's favour in his judgements, the same high notion of the things the Lord's people does not do, the same scorn of boasting: Bridges, nobler and more reticent, does not bring in the Gentiles to point the moral, but the contrast is implicit. *Come gentle peace, while shadows fall* is headed Anon, in the Hymnal while in the notes it is said to be modelled on Longfellow's 'Again as evening's shadows fall'. In the index of the word book it is marked as Bridges'. The general plan of it seems to be his. *Love, unto Thine own Who camest* is said to be adapted but is probably almost original. It is a fine hymn in an odd metre for a Genevan psalm. The metre has occasioned some curious accents which may be a bar to its popularity.

Love, unto Thine own Who earnest
Condescending,
Whom Thine own receivéd not;
Light, That shinedst in the darkness,
But the darkness
Thy splendour perceived not.

Five more hymns are slightly altered from later writers. Faber's *Bread of the world in mercy broken* has been altered extensively for reasons which can hardly be literary. There are three from Watts: *My Lord, my Life, my Love* comes from 'My God, my Life, my Love' and is rewritten in a way which has certainly produced a literary improvement, although the heart of Watts has gone from it. *How beauteous are their feet* is provided with a new conclusion which changes the sense of the whole hymn to what Watts certainly did not intend. *Christ hath a garden wall'd around* comes

from ‘We are a garden walled around’, with a certain improvement in style and a corresponding loss in content. It is said to be for marriages. In spite of an expressed admiration for Watts, Bridges has not understood him. Wesley fares better. *Was ever grief like Thine* has been produced by skilfully writing together three short hymns with not too much loss of spirit. *Ye that do your Master’s will* is compiled from two short hymns: one of them shows Wesley at his most ingenious in antitheses, and these have been carefully preserved.

Five of the original hymns are paraphrases of psalms. These are competent but not among the best work of the Hymnal: they never take wing. Seven hymns remain which are entirely Bridges own work. *All praise be to God, Whom all things obey* is headed as a children’s hymn and is the only one so described. Two more are gloomy hymns hardly relieved by Christian hope. *My heart is fill’d with longing* written for the chorale INNSBRUCK is better. This is the characteristic Bridges:

But Thou, O Love supremest,
Who man. from woe redeemest,
My Maker, Thee I pray,
My soul with night surrounded,
Above th’ abyss unsounded
Lead forth to light, lead to Thy heav’nly day.

Rejoice, O Land, in God thy might for Tallis’ Canon is another national hymn in which Bridges excels. It is needless to quote this or the two last: *Love of love and Light of light* and *Thee will I love, my God and King*. Both of these are among the very best of hymns and these alone would secure Bridges’ position as a hymn writer.

The *Yattendon Hymnal* itself had little circulation: it was a small collection and a large and expensive book, and much of the material while in unquestioned good taste was dull. The words which were not by Bridges in particular were not an attractive selection. Yet Bridges has a good claim to be the godfather of hymn books in this century, since he applied his great influence at a critical time. A great amount of ancient material had become available during the previous century and was ripe for assessment. Bridges had no historical theory of words comparable to that, he had for music: it would have been better if he had for some works of low literary and religious quality are found in the *Yattendon Hymnal*. His own hymns are widely used and some are very popular: in eight-major hymn books of the. present time over half of his work is found. He did considerably determine the type of tune that was to become popular: but probably his greatest contribution was his insistence on high critical standards in hymnody. He would not touch what he did not consider worthy and he was rather scornful of other people’s work in the matter. To the last he refused to become involved in a music society or hymnal committee which might compromise his principles.