



What's new from America

Treasure No 41: What's new from America by Erik Routley: An article from Bulletin, 135

Does anybody over there want to know? Well—1976 is on the way, and July 4th will be a Sunday. Hymnologically, what's to celebrate on this side of the Atlantic?

In the past two years (I am writing at Michaelmas, 1975) American Protestants have put out five hymnals, of which two, I think, deserve special notice. The others are more predictable, and, if (as I intend to) one is concentrating in new productions, less interesting.

Probably the most massively publicized event in this line was the inception of the *Baptist Hymnal* in March 1975. This book serves the Southern Baptist Convention (which as readers probably know, is one of the most influential and powerful Christian groups over here, and much given to habits musically evangelical); it supplants the previous edition of 1956. When it was published, a hymn-singing marathon was arranged in Nashville, Tenn., where the Convention has its headquarters, and in this, through the assiduous ministry of a number of choirs, every hymn in the book was sung in (I think) a week.

The 'Gospel song' tradition (what the English call the 'Sankey' tradition) in the Southern Baptist Church still requires that its hymnal shall remain the most comprehensive source of these songs among standard books. There are those in that communion, however, who hope that the vocabulary may be widened. At the pace they have moved at here, this will be a slow process; but while the general impression of this book is still that of a culture on its own, you find plenty of 'standard' material tucked in alongside the traditional songs of evangelical zeal. The trouble is that 'standard' material in the rest of the USA tends to include things like 'Joyful, joyful, we adore thee' (tune from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony), and it's regarded as 'progress' to have that, and the tune that Americans call 'HAMBURG' and Englishmen 'BOSTON' (what's the sociology of that?) to 'When I survey'. However, one comes across 'Let all mortal flesh (not new to Baptists) and 'O sing a song of Bethlehem', and 'All praise to thee for thou O king divine', and one also sees some negro spirituals; in some parts the Baptists of the south are actually moving faster than the 66-strong committee engaged on this book bargained for; but it is quite clear how hard the reformers must have had to press for any alteration of the conservative style. It is, within its context, a pretty skilful operation, and it must not be harshly judged if it does not contribute much of interest in the way of new tunes and texts.

Secondly there is *Hymns for the Living Church*, a non-denominational hymnal from a commercial publishing house which was founded as a purveyor of 'Gospel Songs' and is nowadays doing a good deal to change its image; but this hymnal is in the older style, and indeed is not very different from the Baptist Hymnal in its approach and ethos. It takes a conservative evangelical line in its choice of tunes and texts, and the new tunes it provides are usually written in the 'Gospel song' style. I was interested in a hymn, 'Redeemed! How I love to proclaim it!' whose tune, called 'ADA', is marked 1966 but really does sound like an old English or Scottish country dance. (It's the folk style that could rescue the 'Gospel' style; here and there the Sankeys come so near carols: just give them a sense of humour and they'd be over the line.) The editor of this book is Dr Donald Hustad, a well known and able musician in the Baptist tradition. So one can't quite call this 'Hymns for a Progressive Church'; but within its field of reference it is pretty honest.

The third book is the *Book of Worship* for U.S. Forces, published late 1974, in Washington D.C. and printed by the Government Printing Office, replacing a book put out in 1958. I don't know what we should expect in Britain of a hymnal printed by H.M. Stationery Office; but this one is an honest attempt to provide about 600 hymns that could be used in a community that contains Catholics, Protestants and Jews. So naturally it is a real bran-tub. It has a Jewish section—in which you can see what the *Yigdal* is supposed to look like and how the Jewish people sing its tune; and some hymns of old-style Catholic devotion, some Gospel hymns, some American folk hymns, some guitar-songs from the youth leaders, and 'The church's one foundation'. It has been enthusiastically put together—not, I think, with very reflective criticism of texts and tunes, but at least by people who knew their way about and could see the point of 'Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle' as well as that of 'Lord of the Dance'. The one huge *gaffe*, where enthusiasm outran prudence, was the inclusion of Sydney Carter's 'Friday Morning', containing the line, 'To hell with Jehovah!' in a book that would fall into the hands of Jewish worshippers; people have already pounced on that in high places in Washington. I find a few temperamental harmonizations (I can't sit down with people who think that they need to rewrite a Gibbons bass), but on the whole, again, it's shrewd; not much poetry, but a smooth job made of a task which would have daunted most of us. The book has, near its end, the best short article I know on playing the guitar for worship, by my friend Chaplain James Shannon, who does (well).

I don't think that the promoters of 'Come and Sing' in Westminster Abbey are likely to find much there to help celebrate 1976: but if one's looking for the cutting edge in American hymnody, then I think you ought to have the other two I am about to mention.

The *Covenant Hymnal* was published in late 1973 for the Evangelical Covenant Church of America; this is the USA version of the Swedish Mission Covenant Church (which was in pre-1972 days affiliated to the International Congregational Council and is in Sweden an intelligent minority group). By modern standards the book is substantial—630 hymns plus 37 liturgical miniatures (of the sort so often found in American hymnals). Most of it is middle of the road material, but there are some interesting new things. No. 349 shows a new tune in four tens for 'Lead us, O Father, in the paths of peace' by Harry P. Opel (b. 1921) — D major, free rhythm, beautifully balanced and eminently singable without any attempt to be 'clever'. No. 357 has a very useful tune in 6.5.6.5 D, 'WHITWORTH' by Walter MacNutt (b. 1910) for Fred Kaan's 'When in his own image'. 'WACHUSETT' (387) by Katherina K. Davis (b. 1892) in 10.10.10.6 might almost deceive you into thinking it was the 151st Genevan Psalm tune, with its solid modal line; and another tune of hers, 'MASSACHUSETTS' (448) in CMD to a new text, 'Make room within my heart', would equally well fool you into giving it a folk origin in either of our countries. A lot of the harmonization has been done by A. Royce Eckhardt (b. 1937) but his own tune 'RICHMOND BEACH' (537), with another rather good new text 'Your cause be mine'. 8.7.8.7.8.8.7 has the same sturdiness about it. I find in many of these tunes a style which RVW himself wouldn't have disdained, and in others a touch of the better 'public school' diction—strong, singable melody with a good contrapuntal bass. Nothing alarming or eyebrow-raising, and maybe some would find it a bit over-respectable: but in certain contemporary American books I find so much 'permissive music'—slapdash stuff that simply ignores the decencies of musical discourse—that I find the rectitude of some of this pretty refreshing. Not very much comes from people born after 1930, though there's one text from an author born in 1948 which reflects, in its very first line, the collapse of grammar that modern education has conspired to produce.

The *Hymnal* of the United Church of Christ, late 1974, concludes my list at the moment, and this is another that one must pause over. The UCC is the body which includes the Congregationalists, though it differs from the British URC in not including Presbyterians. The book of the old Congregational tradition was the *Pilgrim Hymnal* 1958 which I place alongside the *Hymnal* 1940 of the Episcopalians as the most responsible pair of books of the period 1930-60. The UCC Hymnal represents the modern American fashion for cutting down supplies; the *Pilgrim* offers just under 500 hymns; this one, 313; and a lot of traditional material has had to go to make room for modern things. So the pilgrims have to make a fairly smart pace to catch up. But the editors of 1974 have done a good deal of valuable homework. They arrange their book according to the Confession of Faith of their church (all right, I suppose; better than dead alphabeticism, but when will somebody do it like the *Bible*?); and a certain impatience with the traditional has left room for at least some

interesting new music, and (at last!) some texts that must be noticed by anyone else. One of the First unusual things one comes across is the first appearance in a hymnal of the tune 'DE TAR' (38), by Calvin Hampton (b. 1938), a notable American composer who doesn't usually write hymns. This, for 'Before Jehovah's awful throne', is rhythmic, subtle, instrumental and keeps the singer safe through plenty of tonal adventure. A little further on (44) one finds a good tune (I think so: its opening phrase coincides with one of my offerings in *Eternal Light*!) by Richard Warner (b. 1908 and so he's entitled to have got there first) called 'EARL AVENUE', in 4 x 10. The words with it include these stanzas:

*The mountains rise in ranges far and high
above the walls men throw against the sky;
I cannot bid them stay on border lines,
embossing earth the way my will defines.*

*The mighty rivers cannot choose to flow—
through this land and through that refuse to go—
they take the water from one neighbor's rain
and make another's desert green with grain.*

*I cannot cause a partial sun to shine
on those whose color is the same as mine,
and keep in darkness those who should be free
to build a better world along with me.*

*If neither mountain, flowing stream, nor sun
can choose one people and another shun,
then I, O Lord, must let no barrier stand
between me and my brother's outstretched hand.*

William Nelson, 1967

That text I find most interesting: as a statement of Christian doctrine it is negligible; it is humanistic ('Lord' in the last verse could mean anything). But it happens to be the first piece of literature I have come across in an American hymnal for many a day. It takes me back to those splendid 19th century Unitarian hymns, whose style so often outran their theology, but which in that very matter of style put every English contemporary since Milman to shame. It looks as if Whittier and Hosmer are coming back. (In two places above I think 'or' for 'and' would be better: and this author is clearly untroubled by the ferocious onslaught made in some quarters in what they call the 'sexist' use of words like 'brother'.)

Well: how do you react to this?

*Two Adams walked upon the earth:
for woe, for woe; for joy, for joy.*

*Two Eves came to fill a dearth
for woe, for woe; for joy, for joy.*

*Two Adams bridging man and God ...
Two Eves brought to man a rod ...*

*Two Adams plunged in death's dark sea: ...
Two Eves wept beside the tree: ...*

*Two Adams weighed in Father's scale: ...
To Eve, farewell! To Mary, hail! ... (71)*

That is a poem by F. L. Battles (b. 1915) based on the passage in Irenaeus expounding the doctrine of ‘recapitulation’. It has a folksy tune by Joseph Willcox Jenkins (b. 1928). With it goes another from the same author, this time based on Cyprian’s chapter in *De Unitate* on the unity of the Church:

*The Church of Christ is one:
many are the rays of the sun,
but only one parent light.
Take a ray from the sun,
uncleft the sun remains;
The Church of Christ is bathed suffused
in the Lord’s undying light;
although on all the earth diffused,
ever its light is one ...*

*The Church of Christ is one;
many are the streams of a spring:
the source undivided stands,
Choke a stream at the source,
the stream will fail - go dry;
the wellspring of the Church outflows
in many streams, and still the Head
thereof is always one,
One alone the source.* (153)

(st. 2 of 3 omitted here). This, in a complicated metre with an elusive rhyme-scheme which disappears after verse 1, has a strong C major tune by Stanley Tagg (b. 1930) which binds it all together very firmly.

One Kaan (‘The modern city’), one Pratt Green (‘When the church of Jesus), no Wren - but we can forgive a meagre showing of the modern English for the sake of some fairly bold writing by the natives. This may serve to give just a taste of what the UCC hymnal has to offer. Naturally in a short book much is missed, but here alone I see some genuine forward thrust. It is interesting, by the way, to note that the only other hymn based on a patristic source is also American—an old one now, ‘Shepherd of tender youth’. I had not noticed before how the preoccupation of our English scholars (not a few hymn-translators of 1850-1906 were good patristic scholars) with medieval hymnody caused them to miss many chances in the Fathers.

One last word. It was a while before I discovered what it is in American hymnals that gives a slightly dry and pedantic impression. I now see that it is their shyness of the English seventeenth century authors. They’re almost wholly ignorant of Baxter, Herbert, Vaughan; and even Crossman’s ‘My song is love unknown’, now coming in, is always abridged. If the early Fathers prove an unexpected source of irrigation, what might the puritan Fathers do for us over here!

Baptist Hymnal (1975 edition): Convention Press, 127 Ninth Avenue North, Nashville, Tenn., 37202
Hymns for the Living Church: Hope Publishing Company, 380 South Main Place, Carol Stream, Illinois, 60187
Book of Worship for United States Forces: U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 20402
Covenant Hymnal: Covenant Press, 3200 W. Foster Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60625
Hymnal of the United Church of Christ: United Church Press, 1505 Race Street, Philadelphia, Pa., 19102

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