# Childhood and the Christian hymn

**Treasure No 60: Childhood and the Christian hymn by Ian Sharp:**
**An article from Bulletin 199, Spring 1994**

When children sing Christian hymns and songs they engage in an activity which is intended to be social and educational as well as religious. The experience is both communal and individual, for unless it means something to the child, the enterprise, however well-intentioned, ends in failure. The response of the child is crucial, and impressions, good or bad, are likely to be lasting. The singing of hymns and songs in a religious setting is more than an extension of schooling, for beyond any didactic considerations there are the specific moral and spiritual overtones that are the hallmarks of the catechist. Hymn-singing by children raises many issues, not least of them being the extent to which the likely feelings and experience of the children themselves are taken into consideration. Are children a special category, with their own forms of liturgy and religious song? Is children's hymnody (using the term in its widest sense) differentiated only by function or also by style? Are there differences between what is sung in church and what is sung in school? What is the effect of children's hymns on adults as well as on children themselves? What about the reaction of young choristers, often performing in a semi-professional capacity, who might well find themselves singing 'children's hymns' that are at variance with the rest of their sung repertoire?

The practical issue of how best to write for children was addressed in a characteristically straightforward manner by Isaac Watts, who, in the Preface to his *Divine Songs for Little Children* of 1715 spoke of his attempt to 'sink the language to the level of a child, and yet to keep it (if possible) above contempt'. Indeed, this passage should serve as a guiding principle for all who write for or organize worship for the young. The intention, then, is to be childlike, without being childish.

Children's hymns have long been the butt of much good humour, especially if taken out of context. Consider these well-intentioned verses of J.M.C. Crum, which appear in *The Church and School Hymnal* of 1926. Were they ever taken seriously?

*O once in a while*
*We obey with a smile*
*And are ever so modest and prudent,*
*But it's not very long*
*Before something is wrong*
*And somebody's done what he shouldn't.*

*In meadow and wood*
*The cattle are good*
*And the rabbits are thinking no evil;*
*The anemones white*
*Are refined and polite*
*And all the primroses are civil.*

*O Saviour, look down*
*When we sulk or we frown*
*And smooth into kindness our quarrels;*
*Till our heart is as light*
*As a little bird's flight*
*And our life is as free as a squirrel's!*

Not only is the rhyming comic in a mischievous sense, but the moralistic tone has an unpleasantly forced ring to it—certainly to today's generation. Is this really all one can expect of a children's hymn? Perhaps Canon Crum, who wrote many splendid hymns, is really pulling our leg with what Erik Routley has called 'this most remarkable essay in hymnic humour'.

Even the famous verses by Watts, 'How doth the little busy bee …' feel curiously contrived. Not surprisingly, they inspired the equally well-known parody by Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 'How doth the little crocodile improve his shining tail, and pour the waters of the Nile on every golden scale!'

The question of parody prompts several thoughts. It demonstrates that the originals must have been popular enough to be remembered by children and adults. It also shows that there is a sufficient difference between writing for the old and writing for the young for any mismatch of style and function to be obvious, to the extent of causing unease or even ridicule.

Hymns and carols of childhood are still parodied; how many of us have sung, in our time, 'While shepherds washed their socks by night while watching ITV, an angel of the Lord came down and switched to BBC'! There are also more sophisticated parodies, such as Charles Causley's verses, 'On a starless night and still / Underneath a sleeping hill / Comes the cry of sheep and kine / From the slaughter house to mine'. This gains in acerbic intensity when the tune BUCKLAND, 'Loving Shepherd of Thy Sheep', is recalled.

What is it about hymns sung in one's childhood that is likely to remain in the memory? For some, it is undoubtedly the tunes. Donald Webster, for instance, has written of his early love for the hymn 'Crown him with many crowns', partly on account of Elvey's magnificent tune DIADEMATA, even though it was many years before he could understand all the words.

Many memories of hymn-singing are more general. In *Hymns and the Christian 'Myth'* Lionel Adey recalls his early life in the English Black Country, with the Victoriana at his grandparents' former public house and the image of:

> Great-Aunt Tilly's black dress, so long and voluminous that to my infant eyes her legs appeared to fold in sections, in the manner of an accordion, as she sat down, swept the cat from her lap (for she could not abide cats), and recalled in tones of wistful reprehension the

> long defunct family prayers and Sunday evening performances of what she described as 'beautiful 'ymns'.

This leads us to the central issue of the intelligibility of hymns and their suitability for children, so aptly summarized by John Wesley in the Preface to his *Hymn Book for Children* of 1790, chosen from his brother's *Hymns for Children and Others of Riper Years*:

> There are two ways of writing or speaking to children: the one is, to let ourselves down to them; the other, to lift them up to us. Dr. Watts has wrote in the former way, and has succeeded admirably well, speaking to children as children, and leaving them as he found them. The following hymns are written on the other plan; they contain strong and manly sense, yet expressed in such plain and easy language as even children may understand. But when they do understand them, they will be children no longer, only in years and stature.

It is interesting to note that, from the perspective of the late eighteenth century, the children's hymns of Watts were considered to be 'speaking to children'. Later commentators have been divided about Watts's ability to relate to children. As C. S. Phillips put it in *Hymnody Past and Present*:

> The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries expected children to be religious in the same way in which they were dressed—like little 'grown-ups'. *The Divine and Moral Songs for Children* of good Dr Watts enjoy an unenviable notoriety for their failure to understand a child's mentality, their perpetual harping on the improving 'moral' and their indifference to the possible effect on tender minds of their grim and threatening presentation of the religion of Jesus Christ.

Louis Benson, in *The English Hymn*, presented a rather more balanced assessment of Watts's hymns for children:

> Both by its contents and its influence it [*Divine Songs*] is worthy to stand beside the *Psalms and Hymns*; for it must be regarded as the fountainhead of the afterwards extensive Children's Hymnody in the English language; though its constant reprinting for a century was as a book of verse or chap book, and not as a children's hymn book.

Watts himself dedicated his Divine Songs to the three daughters of a family he was staying with, in the hope that the book might 'awaken all the children that shall read these songs, to furnish their Memories and beautify their Souls like yours'. The verses were to be sung to tunes traditional at the time; there was nothing specially 'childish' about the music.

> *These Divine Songs may be a pleasant and proper matter for their daily or weekly worship to sing one in the family, at such time as the parents or governors shall appoint, and therefore I have confined the verse to the most usual psalm tunes.*

From this one should not assume that children were necessarily subjected to dull experiences. For a start, they probably enjoyed singing with the adults, if this was the family custom, and also, the tunes of the time were often quite sprightly.

With the growth of the Sunday School movement in the nineteenth century many more hymns for children appeared; a fascinating and significant development in many ways. Let Erik Routley take up the tale (in *Hymns Today and Tomorrow*):

> In the nineteenth century the climate shifted somewhat. The child was not now primarily a young rascal who must be snatched from the devil's den, but a pupil who must be taught. The school teacher—the Sunday-school teacher—is never far from the nineteenth-century children's hymn. Mrs Alexander, the authoress of 'Once in royal David's city' and of 'There is a green hill', is very much the school teacher. Simplicity is her great virtue: didacticism commonly robs her of that sense of incongruity which delivers the hymn writer from bathos. It was she. after all, who penned the immortal stanza, in a hymn expounding Christian death in terms of the country church graveyard:
>
> *They do not hear when the great bell*
> *Is ringing overhead;*
> *They cannot rise and come to Church*
> *With us, for they are dead.*
>
> *It was therefore not incongruous to cause children to speak of themselves as 'Little children'. This was thought to be a good attitude in a docile pupil.*
>
> *We are but little children weak*
> *Nor born to any high estate.*

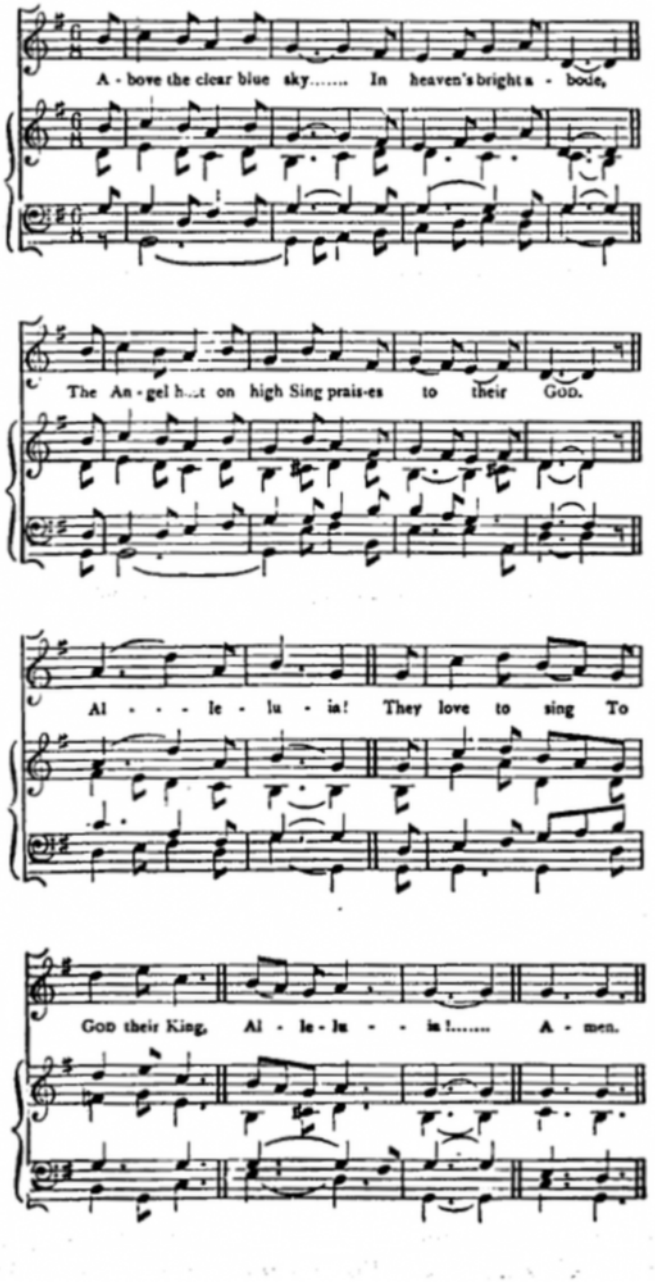
One finds an affinity here with many of the titles of the short character pieces for piano of the period that have a childhood connection, as in the children's music of Schumann and Tchaikovsky. The concept of childhood came of age in the nineteenth century, at least among the more leisured classes of society. Indeed, Lionel Adey has gone so far as to say that the consecration of childhood was the cardinal heresy of the Victorian era as the cult of adolescence has been that of ours.

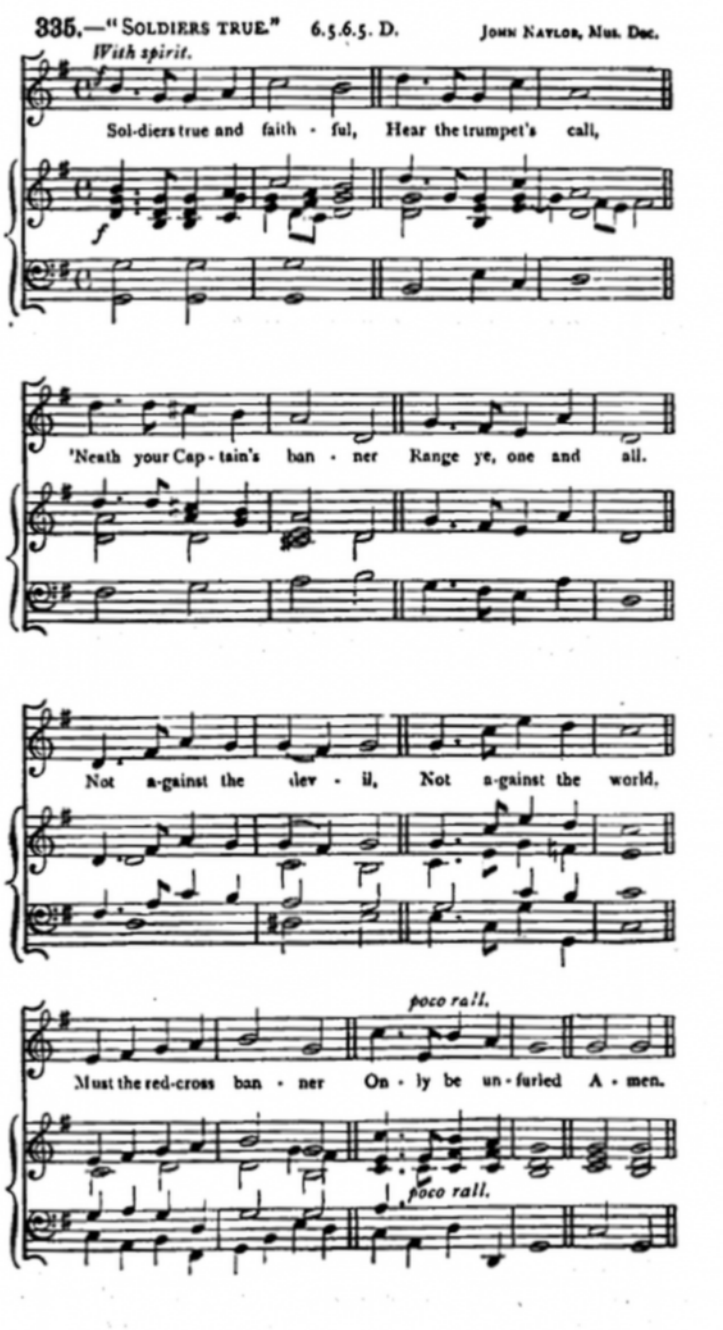
Nineteenth-century editors of hymn-books for children took their task seriously. Here is Mrs Carey Brock, writing in the Preface of *The Children's Hymn Book* of 1881:

> One great object has been to provide pleasing melodies, such as children can easily learn, and at the same time to secure the sound harmonies which shall accustom their ears to what is good.

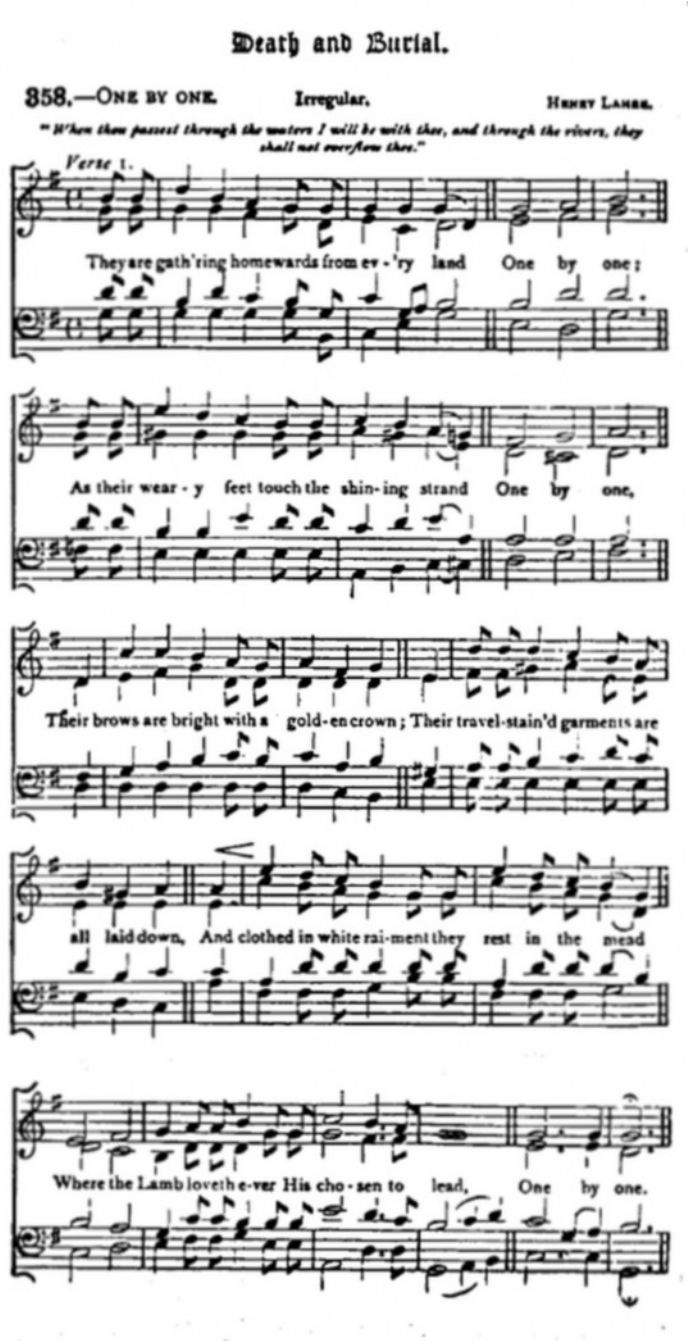
Two tunes from this Victorian book can illustrate the intentions of the editor in this respect. The first, CHILDREN S VOICES (note the title), has a lilting 6/8 quality about it. The second, SOLDIERS TRUE, is set in a more 'manly' march time, to fit the 'temperance' theme of the words. Both tunes are designed for unison singing with keyboard accompaniment.

**269.**—CHILDREN'S VOICES. 6.6.6.6.4.4.4.4. E. J. HOPKINS






The distinctive musical qualities of hymn-tunes specifically intended for children evolved in the nineteenth century. Before that time there was little differentiation between the style of tunes sung by adults and by children. Music such as the shorter, children's version of the Lutheran Lesser Catechism, as set by Bach in the *Clavier-übung*, seems to be a rarity. The nineteenth-century tunes often demonstrate a simplicity of style and ease of learning, an affinity with folk-songs, unison melodies, catchy rhythms, and flowing, supporting harmonies. On the negative side can be found instances of banal chromaticism, sentimentality of style, excessive repetition and plain dull writing, often in a tedious four-part texture. But, to be fair, these qualities are not restricted to music for children or to hymn-tunes! Here is a case in point: a specially commissioned hymn, also from *The Children's Hymn Book*.




Appearing in the section on ‘Death and Burial’, this mawkish text is amply matched by its music. But it was undoubtedly considered appropriate material at the time and is symptomatic of an attitude towards childhood that emphasizes sentiment but does not attempt to shield the young from the realities of life and death. The music is full-blooded and has something or the fear and exhilaration to which children respond in a Roald Dahl story or Maurice Sendak painting. Parallels can be drawn with developments in other music genres, and with painting and literature.

In the twentieth century, newly-composed children’s hymns, especially those specially designated ‘For Children’ in standard books, tend to adopt a rather bland musical idiom, breaking away from the excessive chromaticism of much nineteenth-century writing. Take, for instance, Lesbia Scott’s text, ‘I sing a song of the saints of God’, set to John Henry Hopkins’s tune GRAND ISLE in *The Hymnal* 1940. [Also in *BBC*, *BHB*, *WOV*. Ed.) The words date from 1929, the tune from 1940. This hymn has a fresh, almost out-of-doors appeal, and undoubtedly reflects the mood of its age. Its positive image of the child is far removed from the rather dour moralizing of the eighteenth century. (Isaac Watts—‘My God, I hate to walk, or dwell / With sinful children

here: / Then let me not be sent to hell, / Where none but sinners are.' Lesbia Scott—'For the saints of God are just folk like me. / And I mean to be one too.')

An important milestone in British hymnody for children and young people was *Songs of Praise*, both in its general contents and in Part VI, intended for the youngest children. The 1933 Companion referring to this particular section of the book is still informative and entertaining on the subject of childhood and hymnody. but the choice of material now appears somewhat dated.

One success story of recent times belongs to the BBC's own hymn-books for schools. *Come and Praise 1* of 1978 and *Come and Praise 2* of 1988. The first volume has sold over two million copies to schools and churches. This means that many times this number of children and adults are singing hymns and songs from this collection, which represents a considerable proportion of the population of the country. The contents include traditional and contemporary material and as the Editor, Geoffrey Marshall-Taylor, writes in the Introduction to *Come and Praise 2*:

> The music of the books is, above all, singable. It has been called the 'music of the people', which I suppose means that it has more links with the tunes people have in the past sung outside formal places of worship. This isn't to say that all the items lend themselves to a full-throated delivery; many are quietly reflective, such as 'Mother Teresa's Prayer', which has been arranged in two echoing parts. The variety ranges from rounds to spirituals. Melodies are predominantly European, but Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Caribbean are also represented.

An example of a multi-faith song on the theme 'Caring for the World' is 'From the tiny ant to the elephant … care for them, it's up to you', from *Come and Praise 2*. It is clear from the words that there is no reference to any particular religious tradition here. The music is in the contemporary style found in children's songs: 'with an easy swing', use of syncopation, a catchy chorus and an optional group or echo structure. For all its simplicity, this song is in many respects a sophisticated product, designed with the child market in mind. Tried and tested on children, it remains nevertheless a creation of the adult world. Perhaps Dr Watts would have approved!

Much of the children's material that soon becomes 'favourite' is newly written and consequently unknown to an older generation. This can make for divisions in an all-age church congregation of adults and children. Another factor is the standard of performance, for in schools children are often used to hearing professionally-produced recorded accompaniments to songs and hymns, so that the more home-spun interpretations by local church musicians may easily sound unconvincing in comparison.

Controversy can still surround the suitability of hymns and songs for children. 'You can weigh an elephant's auntie', from *New Songs of Praise 4* of 1988 is a rather facile little song, written for young children. At its first performance it was sung and danced by a group of children; it proved attractive to listen to and came over well on television. Yet this song was the subject of infuriated correspondence in the press several months later, with the General Secretary of the Guild of Church Musicians condemning the 'offending verses' outright, apparently outraged by the reference to 'fleas, worms and nanny goats'. As always, so much depends on the context. What might be right for a school assembly (the original setting for the song) could be wrong for a church service.

In the late twentieth century there is, then, a multiplicity of material available for use by children, not all of which is to be found in mainstream hymnals. Indeed, such books have largely discounted distinctive material 'For the Young'. This stems from a desire to resist the notion that children are a special category in the worshipping community. As the Preface to *Rejoice and Sing*, 1991, puts it:

> Nor is there a separate section of children's hymns. Instead the committee has tried to ensure that in every section of the book there are hymns which can be sung by children and adults together.

There is also a reaction in the 'gold standard' modern hymnals against anything smacking of romanticism. If previous ages have appeared to talk down to children, the avowed intention at the present time is to educate children into the sung repertory of the adult church. Comments such as 'Children don't learn any proper hymns at school, so they should learn them at church', and 'We don't sing any of that babyish stuff at our church' are typical of some adult comments that one hears on the subject of children's hymns. In a lecture at our 1991 conference Dr Mary Berry referred to 'the cult of the infantile' and 'a flight from maturity'. She remarked, in the context of a lecture on plainchant, that what matters is not how worship 'goes down' but how it 'goes up'!

While we all know that it is undoubtedly correct to press for the highest possible standards of taste and expression in the worship of the church, the real-life situation is usually rather different. Much of the material used by children is likely to have a very short 'shelf-life'; 'Kids under construction; maybe the paint is still wet', and even the highly questionable 'If Jesus is de bread, is your name on the roll now?' (!!) from *Junior Praise 2* would probably come into this category . These songs are the liturgical equivalent of children's videos and television shows, and many (young) children sing them, enjoy them and learn from them. As *In Tune with Heaven* reminds us, the power of music should be harnessed to encourage children to belong to the church, and the congregation should accept them as they are. Whether we like it or not, one thing is certain: that many of the actual images and associations of childhood (but not the messages) of previous generations are, from a practical point of view, about as relevant to a child today as an old doll or train set. Some children enjoy playing with old toys, but most prefer something new.

Children's diet of hymns and other worship songs will therefore vary considerably from church to church, from school to school and from church to school. And so, too, will the reactions of the children themselves to what they sing. Their comments on the songs and hymns they sing in church and school will not necessarily accord with the view of their elders, and are likely to be extremely wide-ranging. There is no one stereotype of 'children's hymn', any more than there is a single category for middle-aged people, old people, and so on.

Some more words of Erik Routley can remind us yet again that childhood is an artificial, elastic concept, devised by adults. By definition, children are: in a state of growth and need to be encouraged to develop their full potential. Here Routley comments on Christian hymns, but the substance of his remarks have a general application to anything intended for children's consumption.

> There is a profound difference between wanting to let children be children and wanting to keep them children. The eighteenth-century writers did not care for children as children, being too anxious for them to grow up. The nineteenth-century writers tended to shelter them in a

> religious enclave, an enclave as jolly and exciting, to be sure, as a tent in the backyard, but still one in which they must remain for as long as they can be persuaded to stay. The twentieth-century writers have made some effort to treat children as children: but the danger is that they will even more than the nineteenth-century writers romanticize childhood and let the children think that nothing lies beyond what they can assimilate at the age of thirteen. Constantly seeds must fall into the ground and die. Before I have done I hope to drive home this particular doctrine concerning hymns—that a large number of them are meant to be used and discarded, that few of them are meant to be part of a Christian's permanent equipment. Children's hymns are especially of this kind.

Notwithstanding the transitory nature of most music of all kinds, let alone that for children, it must be noted that some hymns written for and about children have achieved lasting fame. There is a fine line drawn between writing down to children and writing above their heads; and each generation works out its guiding principles for effecting this difficult balance. When adults try to be like children, they run the risk of being misunderstood or ridiculed, however worthy their intentions. The inscription on a statue of Isaac Watts in Watts Park, Southampton, reads 'He gave to lisping infancy its earliest and purest lessons'. Yes—but lisping infancy might just decide to rebel, and to go its own way, singing and enjoying songs that, by all the best 'adult criteria, are totally unsuitable in form and content!

The view of childhood epitomized in the Christian hymn of the last two hundred years or so is rich in imagery and full of good intentions. It is far from being a dull, exclusively didactic body of material. But inevitably, it reflects the traditions of an adult world, for it stands at the door of childhood, looking in. Its attitude to children has sometimes coloured the adult perception of childhood for generations to come. When Mrs Alexander wrote her *Hymns for Little Children* in 1848 she could have had no idea of the millions of voices who would still sing, every Christmas, 'Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as he' to H. J. Gauntlett's IRBY. Here, voice and verse give us an image of childhood which is of its time, yet as compelling and distinctive as Schumann's *Kinderscenen* or Chopin's *Berceuse*. At Christmastide, the last bastion of the cult of the child, most of us still sing, more in hope than in expectation, of children being 'mild' and 'obedient'. And the curious, ironic, thing is that children sing it too!

Yet Christmas comes but once a year, and times and children change. No one would wish to alienate young people from worship, and if the challenge of providing suitable material for them to sing is increasingly demanding it is no less rewarding than it was in previous generations. Whether, as adults, our intention is to let ourselves down to children or to lift them up to us doesn't really matter, provided that children's earliest experiences of Christian song are truly childlike and not merely childish.

> *Through him the first fond prayers are said*
> *Our lips of childhood frame.*