



The English Hymn (review)

**Treasure No 64: The English Hymn (review) by Elizabeth Cosnett:
An article from Bulletin 214**

*The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study, by J R. Watson. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997. xi
4–552 pp. £65.00
(£48.00 to Hymn Society members using special order form with July Bulletin)*

The publication of this scholarly, thought-provoking and enormously enjoyable book is a major event for hymnologists. In scale and scope it is comparable only with Louis F. Benson's *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship* (1915) and perhaps more recently with Lionel Adey's two books combined. *Hymns and the Christian Myth* (1986) and *Class and Idol in the English Hymn* (1988).

The new book certainly deserves to achieve the classic status of Benson's earlier work, but for different reasons. Despite an interval of eighty-two years the difference in historical scope is somewhat less than one might expect. Both writers naturally start with the metrical psalmody of the Reformation and Benson concluded with a detailed look at what was, for him, very up-to-date early twentieth-century work. Here he showed a sensitive awareness of the contemporary trends towards 'service and worship' in hymnody which we now call 'the social gospel', alongside an optimism that, with hindsight, verges on complacency:

One might even encourage the XXth century Church to sing those things it believes most vividly and feels most deeply, confident that in any case the permanent foundation of Church Song ... is unshaken.

Professor Watson carries the story forward to the early nineteen-fifties dealing thoroughly with the impact of *The English Hymnal*, *Songs of Praise*, and *The BBC Hymn Book*, but his treatment of the later 'hymn explosion' is confined to a brief, albeit telling, postscript, and the tone is much less optimistic:

They [Timothy Dudley-Smith, Fred Pratt Green, Fred Kaan, Brian Wren and Alan Gaunt] may be seen as trying, perhaps too late, to close the gap between the Church and the World which began with William Walsham How and Christopher Wordsworth.

Although the two books have material, scholarship and even the first part of their titles in common, a major difference emerges in their subtitles. Watson includes the word 'critical', and it is literary criticism of the very highest order, informed by historical insight, that makes this book uniquely valuable. The distinction is clearly seen, for instance, in how each deals with *The Yattendon Hymnal*. Benson describes and assesses it accurately as a 'literary hymn book' but Watson recreates something of its initial impact through his quotations, specific comments and the precise details he gives of the layout and type-faces and the care which they were chosen. This is the sort of writing that should inspire the reader to seek out and experience the original.

In scope, liveliness and insight Adey's work also shares something with Benson's but his perspective is different, much narrower and more exclusively hymnological. Unlike either Benson or Watson, he is concerned firstly with proving a thesis and this makes his work more specialist, although still extremely interesting.

Two other, more recent, books cover some of the same ground. Donald Davie's *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* (1993) is a collection of scintillating essays each with a specific insight into the work of a particular author, but it does not attempt or claim to be an overall survey of the subject. Ian Bradley's *Abide With Me* (1997), on the other hand, is a broad, lively, but rather more generalized treatment of 'the world of Victorian hymns', giving equal consideration to words and music and concluding with a chapter on the use of Victorian hymns in the twentieth century. The stress is firmly on the actual practice of hymnody. Watson writes in his opening chapter:

The hymn has been badly treated. Literary critics have seen it as restricted and churchy and afflicted with what has been described ... as 'a grossness of public statement': the Church sees it as primarily liturgical, textually alterable, and valuable mainly for its doctrinal content. The present book is an attempt to bring about a better understanding of the hymn form on both sides: to help the Church to be aware of the distinctive and precarious heritage of hymnic art which it possesses, and to remove the prejudices of literary critics who have been too easily inclined to see the hymn as a second-rate art form.

This aim, I believe, makes the book unique while the skill with which the aim is pursued makes it excellent. I can best contribute to the success it so richly deserves by recommending it heartily to all serious students and lovers of hymns on both sides of the divide.

The book represents a major academic study of hymns as literature and therefore makes some demands on the reader. The author is clearly aware of post-modern literary theory and uses, where appropriate, insights drawn from it a good example being his treatment of difference in George Herbert's 'King of Glorie, King of Peace', but equally clearly he has no truck with the pretentious obfuscation characteristic of its less intelligent devotees. His style is a model of clarity and has a certain lightness of touch. I appreciated the dry humour behind his comment on *Songs of Praise*:

What Hardy (who was still alive) thought of his appearance in a hymn-book—alongside Bishop How—is not, so far as I know, recorded. What Shelley would have thought is difficult to imagine.

Writing on the hymns of Bishop Cosin he includes in a footnote the 'curious and delightful', and very down-to-earth, description by Cosin's contemporary, Richard Baxter, of the right reverend gentleman's appearance and deportment at the Savoy Conference of 1611. I found just as delightful in a different way the following reflection on verse form:

The verses stand in descending order on the page, surrounded by white spaces around and between, which correspond to the silences between the verses and to the silence which exists around the singing. The verses themselves, therefore, punctuate the silences, developing the thought, repeating the tune, identical in shape yet also different, each contributing its part to the whole.

Those of our members who enjoy deepening their understanding of and response to individual well-loved texts will find some real treasures here. Among the hymns looked at in detail are 'Who would true valour see', 'Nature with open volume stands', 'When I survey the wondrous cross', 'God moves in a mysterious way' and 'In the bleak mid-winter'. Watson is at his very best in this kind of writing. He gives much closer and more detailed readings than do many deservedly popular writers such as the late Canon Frank Colquhoun but his critical analyses are always imaginative as well as academic, in the best and oldest sense of that word. My personal favourite is his discussion of 'Abide with me' in the course of which he

refers to the death of Barkis in *David Copperfield* and then illustrates his belief that Lyte's text is 'both early Victorian and startlingly modern' by developing a moving and illuminating comparison of its last two lines with 'the contrary movement that is found in the centre of *Waiting for Godot*'. Those wishing to dip into the book in this way will not find hymns listed separately in the index under their first lines. First lines of those treated at greatest length are entered under the authors' names but many discussed interestingly, e.g. 'The spacious firmament on high', 'Christians awake' and Kipling's *Recessional* are not listed at all. Footnotes are where they ought to be, at the foot of the page.

The book is also subtitled 'historical' and it certainly contains much historical insight but, probably because it also contains so much quotation and critical appreciation, its historical coherence is web-like as well as linear. Its ideal reader is probably one who brings to it some knowledge of English literature and a basic framework of hymnic history, but who is willing to have assumptions challenged. Such a reader is free to appreciate immediately the pervasive awareness of literary, social and political context and of intertextuality. One of the highlights of early chapters, for instance, is a spirited defence of *The Whole Book of Psalms* against modern attitudes, themselves conditioned by eighteenth-century criticism from people such as John Wesley and Thomas Warton. Syntactical distortions are made to look different in the light of sixteenth-century rhetorical practice. This leads on to speculation 'that the modes of hymn writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would have been different if the ears of the faithful had not been accustomed to the twists and turns of metrical psalmody'.

One expects books of this kind to consider the ways in which hymn-writers refer to the Bible but here we find also a good deal about reference to other texts. The varying effects of translation, especially from German, are discussed, and there are interesting sections on John Wesley as translator and as editor of his brother's works. The chapter 'Charles Wesley and his art', illustrates his use not only of the Bible but also of earlier hymns, such as those by Watts, and of poems, including *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Milton features again when his *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* is related to Byrom's 'Christians awake' and when the 'Miltonic grandeur' of Bridges's translation 'All my hope on God is founded' is made apparent. Ellerton's 'Now the labourer's task is o'er' is seen as a rewriting in Christian terms of Shakespeare's lament for Fidele in *Cymbeline*. The influence of Romanticism on nineteenth-century hymnody is firmly stressed and the comments on 'There is a green hill far away' include the way it exemplifies Wordsworth's theories about poetic language in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The section on Mrs Alexander also, however, makes clear her limitations:

Simplicity has an easy charm, but it also has its disadvantages, nowhere more so than in Alexander's comments on political economy.

Some comparison with Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* would have been welcome but the latter are not included as the author has dealt with them elsewhere.

Reference to the context of hymns sometimes combines scholarship with a refreshingly practical approach. For example the author quotes Montgomery's lines:

*Here in the body pent,
Absent from him I roam,
Yet nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home.*

He then points out the biblical and platonic ideas that underlie the verse but also shows how these may be blended with personal experience:

Once again I think Montgomery is using experience in a remarkable and very moving way: in the days of beds with curtains, going to bed each night must have been very like sleeping in some kind of tent.

A similar approach lies behind the chapter on American hymnody, which shows how British literary and hymnic conventions, especially those concerning landscape, were both developed and transmuted in the New World. The ‘verdant pastures’ of Addison ‘which seem to be imagined from Magdalen walks are set alongside ‘the image of a tranquil settlement in New England’ in Whittier’s ‘When on my day of life the night is falling’. From a series of such comparisons emerge much broader conclusions:

In (his last hymn, the traditional images of Christian experience and the biblical echoes blend with a particular kind of American experience. The result—in Stowe, and Whittier, and many of the others—is a new kind of hymnody, as if the well-used themes of European religious experience had been given a new life by being exposed to the newly independent country, with all its high morality, its seriousness and its love of nature. Above all, hymn-writing was given a new zest by the testimony of individual experience rather than Church doctrine: this was part of the value placed upon freedom of worship and respect for individual conscience.

Although personal experience is given its due place Watson does not on the whole lean much towards psychological criticism. A partial exception is the chapter on Victorian women writers. Particularly interesting here are new views of two writers. Frances Ridley Havergal’s relative good health, serious musical accomplishment and physical activity, including high-altitude climbing, are related to her writing. Watson seems to disagree with Bradley, who in *Abide with Me* includes her in ‘this group of sickly spinsters’. Anna Laetitia Waring’s ‘hidden life’ of love for another woman is also something which I have not seen mentioned elsewhere. While Watson rightly stresses the sublimation of frustrated activity and emotion in many of the divine love songs written by women at that time he also stresses the vital and positive aspects of that which was frustrated and the element of achievement in the sublimation.

It is, I think, possible to give some idea of the mental and imaginative range of this book by referring to two strikingly different sections. The first is headed ‘Hymnological Darwinism’ and develops most ingeniously a sophisticated comparison between natural selection and the state of hymnody when *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was first published, only two years after *The Origin of Species*. The comparison is again implied in later, distinctly barbed, comments on the financial success of *A & M*. It surfaces for the final time in connection with Percy Dearmer whose *Songs of Praise* is seen as an attempt to break free of the ‘close inbreeding which had previously ‘diminished vigour and fertility’. In sharp contrast to such ingenuity is the directness and delicacy of the section on Afro-American slave songs. My experience as a teacher has been that an extremely simple text is often the most difficult to comment upon. Weaker students actually find it helpful when the text contains some fairly obvious difficulties. Watson’s response to the colloquial rhythms and emotive power of these simplest of texts and the distinction he draws between their rhetorical techniques and the debasement of those techniques by later writers mark him out as a very gifted student indeed.

The closing paragraph of the book has a very sober tone, envisaging the possible, maybe probable, demise of the hymn. I should like to think that the author is wrong here, but if he is not he has at least provided it with the finest possible obituary notice. His book is a ‘must’ for the library of any university or college which teaches either hymnology or English literature to degree level. It should also give great pleasure and enlightenment to the serious general reader, although some may wish to browse rather than to proceed straight through. Its price, alas, may put it beyond the reach of some of our members. If so, they should make nuisances of themselves in their local public libraries until it is purchased for them.

Elizabeth Cosnett

© The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

For anyone who enjoys, sings, plays, chooses, introduces, studies, teaches or writes hymns ...

The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Visit www.hymnsocietygbi.org.uk for more details.