EIGHTEENTH CENTURY HYMN WRITERS

O God our Help in ages past,
Our Hope for years to come,
Our Shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal Home.

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

Isaac Watts

J.R.Broome

Some Eighteenth Century Hymnwriters

By

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Where a quoted hymn can be found in Gadsby's Hymnbook, the hymn number is given in parentheses at the end of the line.

Introduction

The eighteenth century witnessed the arrival of hymn singing in the churches. Throughout the Reformation the practice had been to sing only Psalms and this continued up until the end of the seventeenth century. Martin Luther had written some hymns in his day. John Bunyan and Benjamin Keach experimented with hymn-singing in their congregations at the end of the seventeenth century, but these were isolated examples.

In 1707 Isaac Watts published his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. This marked the beginning of hymn-singing in the churches, and as the eighteenth century progressed, Watts's hymns became widely received and used. He also published a versification of the Psalms in 1719, entitled *The Psalms of David,* and these and his hymns were published in a single volume and used in many churches throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He was described as, "the first Englishman who set the gospel to music."

Having set the pattern, as the eighteenth century progressed there appeared a large number of very able hymn writers. The Eighteenth Century Revival inspired Charles Wesley and John Cennick to write hymns to be sung among the newly-formed Methodist Associations. In 1738, Charles Wesley, together with his brother John, published a collection of hymns entitled *Psalms and Hymns*. All but a few were the work of Charles Wesley. A second volume of hymns, entitled *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, was published in 1749. In the meantime in 1741

John Cennick published *Hymns for the Children of God* and in 1745 *Sacred Hymns for the Religious Societies*.

As the century went on other writers composed hymns. In 1755, Philip Doddridge published a volume of hymns and in 1759 Joseph Hart published a volume. This was followed in 1760 by a two-volume set of hymns from the pen of Anne Steele, the only woman hymn-writer of the century. Ten years later, in 1770, John Newton and William Cowper published a volume called *The Olney Hymns*. This was followed in 1776 by a volume from the pen of Augustus Toplady. Right at the end of the century, published posthumously in 1795, came a volume of John Berridge's hymns. Publishers followed by producing selections of the hymns of all these hymn writers, which gradually took over from Watts's *Hymns and Psalms*.

So the century produced a spate of hymn writing. Some of these hymns have become nationally famous. These include:

Watts's hymns:

O God, our Help in ages past; (1139)

When I survey the wondrous cross; (439)

Toplady's hymn:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me; (143)

William Cowper's hymn:

God moves in a mysterious way; (320)

John Newton's hymn:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds. (135)

Probably the most widely-sung hymn-writer was Charles Wesley with such hymns as:

> O for a thousand tongues to sing
> My dear Redeemer's praise;

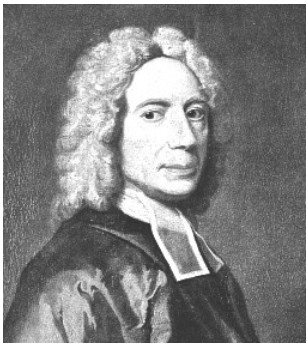
and,

> Love divine, all loves excelling,
> Joy of heaven, to earth come down! (1053)

The eighteenth century has never been equalled in the quantity and quality of hymns produced. Large numbers of selections of these hymns have since been produced and hymn-singing has become accepted in most denominations, with the exception of certain Presbyterian churches, who have continued to sing Psalms only; also in the Church of England, where Psalms and hymns are used together.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Isaac Watts was the first of the great eighteenth century hymn writers, who included Charles Wesley, John Newton, Augustus Toplady, Joseph Hart, William Cowper, John Berridge, Anne Steele, Philip Doddridge and many others. His *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* first appeared in 1707 when he was 33 years old, and although others had written hymns before, including Martin Luther and other godly men, hymns had not been accepted for common use in the churches. John Bunyan and Benjamin Keach had pioneered hymn singing in their own causes among the Particular Baptists in the seventeenth century, but the Independents (of whom Watts was a member), the Presbyterians, the Church of England and many among the Baptists regularly used Psalms for singing in their services.



Watts felt he would like to express gospel truths in verse. It has been said of him that he was "the first Englishman who set the gospel to music and in his special field of song he has never been surpassed" (F. Palmer). He can in many ways claim to be "the father of English hymn singing." He wrote about 700 hymns as well as putting the Psalms into verse. His *Psalms of David* were published in 1719, and for many years down

to the nineteenth century Nonconformist Churches used Watts's *Psalms and Hymns*. He also composed a book of *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, published in 1715.

His life was one of much illness and weakness after one or two bad fevers had left his nerves permanently affected. He never married but lived the larger part of his life with the Abney family at their home in Hertfordshire. He had gone there during an illness about 1712-13 and they kindly gave him a permanent home for the rest of his life.

He had been born at Southampton in 1674. His father was a deacon of an Independent chapel in the town and suffered imprisonment for being a Nonconformist. It is said that when Watts was a baby only a few months old, and his father was imprisoned in the God's House Gate prison in the town, the young Isaac was taken beneath the high walls of the prison by his mother so that his father could hear his cries. He was the eldest of eight, five boys and three girls. His grandfather, on his mother's side was Alderman Taunton. He was of Huguenot descent and his ancestors had come to the town after the St. Bartholomew's massacre of Protestants in France in 1573

From a youth Isaac had the ability to write verse. At the age of seven, in writing for a prize of a farthing for his mother, he composed the couplet:

> I write not for a farthing, but to try
> How I your farthing writers can outvie.

He was educated at the Free School in Southampton until he was sixteen, when he went to London to a Nonconformist academy (the nonconformist equivalent of a university) and stayed there until he was twenty,

when he returned home for a couple of years to complete his studies. In October 1696 he took a post in London as tutor to the son of Sir John Hartopp at Newington and was there for five years. In March 1696 he had been interviewed by two leading Independent ministers "to endeavour that Mr Watts do now go into the ministry."

But according to Watts, he did not preach his first sermon until his twenty-fourth birthday, 17th July 1698. In February 1699 he became assistant minister at Mark Lane Independent Church, London, at which John Owen had been the pastor in the period after 1673. The minister, Dr Chauncy, resigned in 1701 and in 1702 Watts became pastor of the cause and remained its pastor until his death in 1748. In Owen's day at the end of the seventeenth century this cause had numbered among its members some of Cromwell's generals, including Major-General Desborough and Lord Fleetwood. When Watts came there in 1699 only a few of Owen's congregation were alive. Richard Cromwell (the deposed successor of Oliver Cromwell) was not a member there, but was a friend of Watts and members of his congregation. When we recall that Watts in later life knew George Whitefield and Charles Wesley, leaders of the eighteenth century Revival, we can see how he stands as a connecting link between the Puritans of the seventeenth century, and the Evangelicals of the eighteenth century Revival who made such great use of his hymns.

Watts accepted his pastorate at Mark Lane on 8th March 1702, the day King William died and Queen Anne came to the throne. In 1704 the church had grown in size from sixty members when he took over, and so moved, first to Pinners Hall, and then in 1708 to a new building,

built especially for it, in Bury Street, which was capable of seating 428. This shows the expansion of the cause under Watts's ministry.

As the years progressed, he became recognised as the leader of the Nonconformists in London. His friends included Whitefield, Charles Wesley, Doddridge, the Countess of Huntingdon, and leaders of the Nonconformists in America's New England states, such as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. In 1728 the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow conferred on him Doctorates of Divinity, and thus he became known as Doctor Watts. Towards the end of his life, in 1739, he suffered a stroke, and for the last ten years of his life he was permanently weak. He died at the age of 75 on 11th December 1748 and was buried in Bunhill Fields with Owen, Godwin, Bunyan and many other godly men. His grave can still be seen there today, just off City Road.

As a hymn writer Watts is well known throughout the whole country for such hymns as:

> Our God, our Help in ages past,
> Our hope for years to come. (1139)

and,

> When I survey the wondrous cross,
> On which the Prince of Glory died, (439)

which has been termed "the best hymn in the English language". But in present-day hymn books such as *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, there are very few of his hymns. This is because he was a Calvinist, and the teaching in his hymns is not much liked today.

One of his best known hymns is:

Great God! How infinite art thou!
What worthless worms are we! (1)

Others include:

How oft have sin and Satan strove
To rend my soul from thee, my God! (83)

With joy we meditate the grace
Of our High Priest above, (120)

Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain, (125)

Now to the power of God supreme
Be everlasting honour given. (211)

God of eternal love,
How fickle are our ways! (318)

Give me the wings of faith to rise
Within the veil, and see (477)

Up to the fields where angels lie,
And living waters gently roll, (480)

Descend from heaven, immortal Dove,
Stoop down and take us on thy wings, (481)

O that the Lord would guide my ways
To keep his statutes still! (1003)

Come, let us join our cheerful songs
With angels round the throne. (1005)

Some verses which are well-known are:

In thy fair book of life and grace,
O may I find my name
Recorded in some humble place,
Beneath my Lord the Lamb. (4)

The gospel bears my spirit up;
A faithful and unchanging God
Lays the foundation of my hope,
In oaths, and promises, and blood. (83)

And, lest the shadow of a spot
Should on my soul be found,
He took the robe the Saviour wrought,
And cast it all around. (109)

No more, my God, I boast no more
Of all the duties I have done;
I quit the hopes I held before,
To trust the merits of thy Son. (112)

My soul shall pray for Zion still,
While life or breath remains;
There my best friends, my kindred dwell;
There God my Saviour reigns. (361)

Why was I made to hear thy voice,
And enter while there's room;
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come? (440)

Well-known couplets include:

No more a stranger or a guest,
But like a child at home. (139)

Oft he chastised but ne'er forsook
The people that he chose. (318)

And in conclusion:

The more thy glories strike my eyes
The humbler I shall lie;
Thus, while I sink, my joys shall rise
Unmeasurably high. (475)

and the verse on William Carey's grave at Serampore, India:

> A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
> On thy kind arms I fall,
> Be thou my strength and righteousness,
> My Jesus, and my all. (764)

Watts's *Songs for Children*, though not very well-known today, has in its time passed through 600 editions and sold an estimated seven million copies. It is in its way a minor English classic. It contains forty-six separate hymns and poems. The best known is the "Cradle Hymn" with the verse:

> Soft and easy is thy cradle:
> Coarse and hard thy Saviour lay,
> When his birthplace was a stable.
> And his softest bed was hay.

Other memorable lines are:

> 'Twill save us from a thousand snares,
> To mind religion young.

Well-known poems are:

> How doth the busy little bee,
> Improve each shining hour,
> And gather honey all the day
> From every opening flower;

and,

> 'Tis the voice of the sluggard:
> I heard him complain.

Watts is still remembered today in his home town of Southampton, where every four hours the Civic Centre clock plays out on bells the tune, "St. Anne," always used

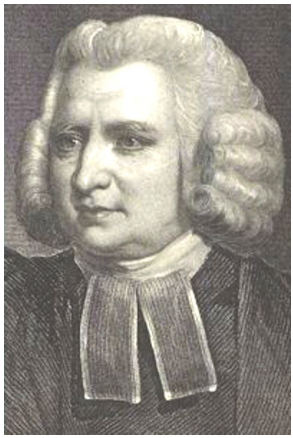
in the singing of his hymn, "O God, our Help ..." There is also a park named after him with a statue of him in the centre of it. It is said that while standing on Southampton Old Walls and looking across the River Test to the fields beyond, he composed the verse of "There is a land of pure delight":

> Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood,
> Stand dressed in living green,
> So to the Jews old Canaan stood,
> While Jordan rolled between. (1022)

So long as evangelical truths are loved, Watts's memory will remain fresh in many hearts for generations to come.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Charles Wesley was born at Epworth in Lincolnshire on 29th December 1707. He was the son of the Rector of the parish, Samuel Wesley. At the age of eight he was sent to Westminster School, and in 1726 he went on from there to Oxford University, where he graduated in 1733. He says for the first two years at university he was negligent of religion and knew no separation from the world. But about 1728 he had his first serious thoughts, and started to read his Bible regularly, pray and go to the Lord's Supper, and he says that among his fellow students, "this gained me the harmless name of Methodist."



He had been brought up in a Christian home, and so in his early years the change in him was not so visible as that in a man like Newton. He was one of a group at Oxford who took the religion of the Church of England more seriously than most, and were mocked for regularly attending the communion service and other practices, such as visiting the poor and sick and going to the prisons.

So the work in him began gradually with a study of the Scriptures, and followed with a desire to help others.

One of the new members who was added to the group was called George Whitefield, and it is interesting to know that Charles Wesley was instrumental in his call by grace. They all suffered much ridicule in Oxford in their day.

In 1735 Charles was ordained a minister in the Church of England and in the same year he sailed for America, a very risky undertaking in those days. While there he suffered much ill-health from dysentery and returned to England the following year. The ship was caught in a bad storm at sea and was in danger, but for Wesley it was a time of blessing in his soul. He wrote, "In this dreadful moment I bless God I found the comfort of hope; and such joy in finding I could hope, as the world can neither give nor take away. I had that conviction of the power of God present with me, overruling my fear and raising me above what I am by nature, as surpassed all rational evidence and gave me a taste of the divine goodness." It is interesting to know that this visit of the Lord to his soul came after much wrestling in prayer, for in the early part of the storm he says, "I strove vehemently to pray but in vain. I persisted in striving yet still without effect. I prayed for power to pray continually repeating the name of Jesus till I felt the virtue of it at last." He arrived at Dover and was welcomed back in London by his friends.

At this time in his life he was influenced by several books, among which were *A Serious Call* by William Law, and *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* by Scougal. He also met Count Zinzendorf, leader of the Moravians, who had talked with him; also another Moravian missionary, Peter Bohler, influenced him. He was, in fact, not blessed in his soul as he would have wished, and felt

to have very little evidence of his interest in the truth. About this time he met his sister, Kezzy, who was in deep soul trouble, and she told him weeping that she believed now that there was such a thing as the new creature. She owned there was a depth of religion she had never fathomed and said that she was not, but longed to be, converted and would give up all to obtain the love of God. Charles says, "I prayed for her and blessed God from my very heart." He felt in the same place himself, and the echo of his feelings and his sister's comes out in the hymn which he later wrote:

> Love divine, all love excelling,
> Joy of heaven, to earth come down!
> Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
> All thy faithful mercies crown.
> Jesus, thou art all compassion;
> Pure unbounded love thou art;
> Visit us with thy salvation;
> Comfort every sinking heart. (1053)

He resumed his ministry in England, preaching mainly at Oxford and London. But ill-health overtook him, and in 1738 he had a severe attack of pleurisy and at the same time felt in a very dark place spiritually. In this illness the Lord appeared and greatly blessed him in a remarkable way. He went to recover to the home of a poor but godly man, whose sister had just been called by grace and still felt much blessing in her own soul. She told Charles of her blessing and longed to comfort him.

On Whitsunday morning she had a strange persuasion to go outside the door of his bedroom and utter the words, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise and believe and thou shalt be healed." Though at first Charles

did not realise who had spoken the words, they were so powerfully blessed of the Lord to him that they were the means of delivering him from his darkness and unbelief. The lady afterwards confessed to him, "It was I, a weak sinful creature, spoke; but the words were Christ's; he commanded me to say them, and so constrained me that I could not forbear."

And so in this unusual way the Lord brought to Charles Wesley that assurance of His mercy that he had wished to feel. In taking up his Bible he opened on the words, "He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall put their trust in the LORD." That night he wrote in his diary, "I now found myself at peace with God and rejoiced in the hope of loving Christ ... I saw that by faith I stood; by the continual support of faith, which kept me from falling, though of myself I am ever sinking into sin ... yet confident of Christ's protection." This experience he recorded in many of his hymns, the most well-known probably being:

> O for a thousand tongues to sing,
> My blest Redeemer's praise,
> The glories of my God and King,
> The triumphs of His grace.
>
> He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
> He sets the prisoner free;
> His blood can make the foulest clean,
> His blood availed for me.

After this blessing he again knew times of darkness, but never so great as he had experienced before it. He now assisted for six months as a curate at St. Mary's Church, Islington, London, then in May 1739 he began

preaching in the open air, first on village greens in Essex and then to the great crowds at Moorfields, London, who had gathered to hear Whitefield. At the same time he was to be found preaching before the University at Oxford.

It was to high and low that the gospel went forth in England in those days, and the Lord took these men from the great universities, such as Berridge from Cambridge and Wesley and Whitefield from Oxford, together with others like Cennick, Newton, Doddridge and Toplady to spread the Gospel in our land. The days were dark, but the light of the Gospel shone forth and our purpose in looking at the lives of these men is to inspire in us a desire that the Lord would again work in our own day in such a powerful and manifest way.

Charles Wesley preached also at Blackheath and Kennington Common to very large crowds. He preached extempore with great power and hundreds were affected in a saving way, some who later preached the gospel themselves. Often he was in great danger from the crowds. At Sheffield, a meeting house where he was due to preach was razed to the ground by a mob and Charles was arrested, accused of being the cause of a riot. On occasions he was hit with stones. Once he was attacked by a man with a sickle, when he exclaimed, "In the Name of the Lord Jesus, keep back," and the effect of these words was to make the man desist. At one house in which he stayed near Leeds, the mob broke all the windows and doors. Once, when preaching in America, he just moved his position when a bullet flew past his head and struck a nearby tree. Thus the Lord protected the life of his servant and enabled him to suffer many attacks and

dangers for the truth's sake, along with other labourers at the time.

In the controversy between Whitefield and John Wesley, his brother, over free grace and free will, Charles was in a difficult position, but it is clear from his hymns where he stood himself:

> Dearest Lord, what must I do?
> Only thou the way canst show;
> Thou canst save me in this hour;
> I have neither will nor power. (1077)

For ten years from 1739-49 his itinerant labours were great. Then in 1749 he was married to a Welsh girl, Sarah Gwynne, and set up a home at Bristol. He still travelled, and she at first travelled with him, but with a family and as he grew older gradually his travels lessened. They had eight children between 1757 and 1768, only three of whom survived. About 1760 he gave up travelling and in 1771 he moved to London, where he died on 29th March 1788, and was buried in St. Marylebone churchyard near his home in Chesterfield Street. He was eighty-two. His wife, who was younger than him, did not die until 1822.

He published the first volume of his hymns together with those of his brother in 1738, entitled *Psalms and Hymns*. In 1749 a two volume collection was published, entitled *Hymns and Sacred Poems* by John and Charles Wesley. In both of these editions most of the hymns were composed by Charles Wesley. In 1779 a selection of hymns was published to which a supplement was later added, so that there were 769 hymns. Of these, 625 were by Charles and five by his brother John. From this it appears quite clear that the hymn writer of the Methodist movement, for these hymns formed the core of the book

used in the Methodist denomination, was Charles and not his brother. A selection of his hymns include:

Now I have found the ground wherein
My anchor, hope, shall firm endure; (96)

'Tis finished! the Messiah dies!
Cut off for sins, but not his own; (97)

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress; (103)

O Love divine, how sweet thou art!
When shall I find my willing heart
All taken up by thee? (249)

Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly; (303)

Jesus, let thy pitying eye
Call back a wandering sheep; (390)

Christ, the Lord, is risen today,
Sons of men and angels say; (485)

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only Light; (726)

Thou sinner's Advocate with God,
My only trust is in thy blood; (928)

Spirit of truth, come down,
Reveal the things of God; (983)

Come, thou long-expected Jesus!
Born to set thy people free; (1054)

Light of those whose dreary dwelling
Borders on the shades of death, (1057)

Jesus, the Truth, the Way,
The sure, unerring Light, (1059)

Weary of wandering from the Lord,
And now made willing to return, (1060)

Lord, I believe a rest remains
To all thy people known, (1061)

When, gracious Lord, when shall it be
That I shall find my all in thee, (1074)

Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
Whose depth unfathomed, no man knows, (1075)

Shepherd divine, our wants relieve,
In this our evil day, (1088)

The last lines he composed, and which he dictated to his wife on his deathbed, were:

In age and feebleness extreme,
Who shall a sinful worm redeem?
Jesus, my only hope thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart.
O could I catch a smile from thee
And drop into Eternity!