

# THE ROCK WHENCE WE ARE HEWN

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In the Society's year of golden jubilee the Editor will hardly be censured for inviting a backward look at our origins. What follows here is in effect a review of the first eight Bulletins published between October 1937 and July 1939 (the eve of world war).

The Society was born in Central Hall, Westminster, on 5 October 1936, the brainchild of Dr J.R. Fleming. This distinguished Scotsman was one of a galaxy of Scottish DDs, some of whom, such as Millar Patrick and W.T. Cairns, were equally expert in this particular field. (I am reminded that, shortly after the war, while attending a broadcasting conference in Dunkeld, I was taken by a well-known Scottish divine to Pitlochry, and to my intense joy heard the minister there say to his small daughter, when introducing her to my companion, 'Now, Jeanie, you can say you've shaken hands with a real DD'. How inconceivable, I reflected, in England!)

From such a stable came Fleming, historian of the Presbyterian Church, worldwide and in Scotland, whose recreations were listed in *Who's Who*, with what is now a pleasing period flavour, as 'travel, study of hymnology, listening-in to wireless'. Only two months after his appointment as joint chairman with Canon G.W. Briggs — a division of labour between the Anglican and Free Churches which until 1973 it was considered tactful to retain — Fleming died, but not before having supplemented his book *The Highway of Reading* with *The Highway of Praise* (Oxford, 143 pp., 3s. 6d.) in which, both directly and indirectly, he gave valuable publicity to the new Society. In due course his place was taken by Frederick J. Gillman of the Society of Friends, author of *The Evolution of the English Hymn*, a moving spirit behind *The Fellowship Hymn Book*, and author of its companion *The Torch of Praise*.

Dr Millar Patrick, a friend of Fleming, became editor of the *Bulletin*, which first appeared in October 1937. Looking ahead, outside our chosen period, in *Bulletin* 32 of July 1945 we find that he asked for an assistant, and that the Conference appointed the Revd Erik Routley MA of Wednesbury, Staffs. A letter from Millar Patrick to Mr Routley introduced Volume Two in January 1948:

'It was a great satisfaction to me to discover my potential successor in you, and this satisfaction has deepened since you have had full control. The Society is fortunate in having found in you an Editor so well equipped with knowledge of both the literary and musical fields of hymnody, and with such magnificent enthusiasm with which to inspire others.'

It was not until *Bulletin* 132 of February 1975, after 27 years and 91 issues that E.R. handed over to Bernard Massey on leaving for America.

From the beginning, in the very forefront of the Society's plans was the firm intention to bring Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology* up to date with a 30-year supplement (1907-37). Encouragement for so vast an enterprise was supplied by 'the assurance of co-operative help from all parts of the world' such as had produced the original

**Dictionary.** 'It is expected that this task will occupy at least three years.'

The Society, however, was by no means to exist for specialists only. It was to 'encourage and promote among interested people intelligent and systematic study of the rich resources of the Church's praise'. It is no surprise to meet the ideal of 'a propagation centre for sound ideas on reform', but it is good to be brought up so sharply from the first against the need to arouse interest in the theological colleges, estimated to number at that time about 75. Due acknowledgement is also made of the need for new hymns, but quite clearly not much is expected of them. For the time being — and, as things turned out, that was a long period — 'these will be kept *in retentis*, until the opportunity comes for assaying their value and making the best of them available for the Church's use'.

At Christmas 1937 the Society was 'thinking big'. It listed fifteen vice-presidents, including Evelyn Underhill and Helen Waddell, an executive committee of eighteen, and 192 other members, among whom we find Norman Goldhawk (Edinburgh), Wilfrid Little (Chelmsford), John Wilson (Charterhouse) and the present writer (Bristol).

April 1938 brought an announcement of the first conference, to be held in Cambridge from 12 to 15 July with headquarters at the Garden House Hotel (daily terms 14s. to 17s. 6d.: book your own rooms). Each day would begin with devotions at 10.30, and each evening there would be Evensong at King's with hymn-singing. Every morning members would hear a lecture:

Wednesday: Canon Briggs on *The Place of Hymns in Worship*

Thursday: Dr W.T. Cairns on *The Constituents of a Good Hymn*

Friday: Dr W.T. Whitley on *The Interaction of Words and Music in Hymns.*

On Thursday evening there would be a service with hymn-singing and an address in one of the Nonconformist churches, and — at the same hour! — a talk and discussion on the aims of the Society.

The June *Bulletin* revealed that so far there had been a very poor response, and members were stirred to emulate the treasurer of the American Society (Edith Holden) who was 'actually crossing the Atlantic to be with us'. In the event thirty members and wives came, including Wilfrid and Hilda Little. The weather was lovely: the Backs looked their best — that 'survival of the old fenland "translated most exquisitely into terms of landscape gardening"' — and the hotel was sheer delight. 'Suitable facilities were afforded for meetings of the Executive' (my own most vivid memory of early conferences is of the Executive scurrying into session at every conceivable opportunity). The lectures had admirably 'served the purpose of stirring the minds of those who listened to them, to stimulating expression of concordant or dissident opinions'. Our lectures still do, but it doesn't feel quite like that.

On the final evening the Conference entertained at dinner Professor C.H. Dodd, Professor Anderson Scott, Mr Bernard Manning, and some members of King's Choir who after dinner adjourned to the hotel verandah and breathed madrigals into the summer night. The

Conference was hopelessly beguiled. By the end of the evening all they had strength to decide was 'Same again next year'.

And so it was: 10 to 14 July 1939. It was a close shave, but it happened. On the first evening the treasurer, W. M. Page, did for members at Cambridge what Robin Leaver many years later was to do beforehand for visitors to the International Conference at Oxford in 1981 – taking them verbally on a tour of the colleges, noting the hymn-writers and composers associated with each one. Thereafter the Travellers' Fare was:

Tuesday: F.J. Gillman on Reality in Worship

Wednesday: F.A. Wilshire on German Chorales

Thursday: A drive to Bedford, Elstow and Olney

Friday: Kenneth Finlay on Hymn Tunes.

The next conference was not to be held until June 1945 (quick work) at Jordans, Bucks.

In those few pre-war years there are many matters beside conferences to draw our attention. Among the books reviewed, due importance is given to *Hymnody Past and Present* by Dr C.S. Phillips, Chaplain to the infant School of English Church Music founded by Sir Sydney Nicholson at Chislehurst. The book bears the dedication 'W.F.: Magistro Discipulus' but the very next *Bulletin* includes a memorial tribute to that same Walter Frere, Mirfield monk and Bishop of Truro, incomparably learned in liturgy and hymnody of all ages, author of the *Historical Edition* (1909) of *Hymns A & M* (1904) which earned him a DD at Cambridge. The title-page of the book bears no trace of his authorship, and 'he never seems to have cared in the least whether it was known to be his or not'.

From Bishop Frere we pass at once to Sir Richard Terry, whose death removed the only Roman Catholic office-bearer from the Society. He is honoured for his long oversight of the music at Cardinal Vaughan's Westminster Cathedral – a choice on a level with Percy Dearmer's of Vaughan Williams to edit the music of *EH* – and for his diverse and inspired researches into Tudor music, carols, and metrical psalms (Calvin 1539 and Scotland 1635), in addition to his rich provision for his own communion both as composer and editor. 'All this speaks of a personality of a quite uncommon order.'

Yet another founding father commemorated was Carey Bonner, General Secretary of the National Sunday School Union and President of the Baptist Union, whose particular gifts enabled him to make a deep mark on the hymnody of his own tradition. Such was his reputation that he had chaired both the words and music committees of the *Baptist Church Hymnal* of 1933, and also the final committee of three. His recent book *Some Baptist Hymnists* is gratefully reviewed: 'he belonged to all the Churches'.

There is one other book review that we may notice: *John Wesley und das Deutsche Kirchenlied* by J.L. Nuelsen (1938). This had to wait more than thirty years for the completion by Arthur Holbrook, our Secretary, of an English translation begun by Sydney Moore and Theo Parry. It was described at the time (January 1973) by E.R. as 'a quite unique and irreplaceable account, a most important historical document, reminding us that the vitality of English-speaking hymnody

entirely due to the foreign influences which have been allowed to play on it'.

Reviews of new hymn-books tumble from these early pages. The very first *Bulletin* examines collections from Switzerland, China and Holland; progressive spirits among the Congregationalists are commended for believing their current book (1916) to be 'fully ripe for revision' – a belief encouraged, it was thought, by the new life given to hymnody through wireless services. Some had even suggested a common book with the same hymns and tunes being sung in all churches, Anglican and Nonconformist. Would not *Songs of Praise* be just right for this – particularly for Congregationalists since it represents the liberal outlook of Dearmer's later years? No, answers the *Bulletin*, because the Anglo-Catholics, for one, wouldn't use it. Rather let the Congregationalists learn from the hits and misses of others and 'provide for the churches of their own tradition one of the finest hymn-books of modern times'. They were not disobedient to the *Bulletin's* vision.

*The Clarendon Hymn-Book* (1936), for all its merits, is considered to fall between the two stools of public school and parish church – a problem that was confronted head on in 1964, both in contents and in title, in *Hymns for Church and School*. Worksop College, ignoring *Clarendon*, has a new book of its own. So has the Anglican Church in Canada. So have children, in *Children Praising*, edited by W.H. Hamilton and Herbert Wiseman, who had found most of the existing material so awful that they had had to supply much of the book themselves. So has *Hymns A & M*, in a Shortened Edition, originating in the mind of Nicholson, *A & M's* first lay Chairman. It was the first stage in cutting out the dead wood from the Standard *A & M* of 1922, but – remembering 1904 – not using the axe too freely, and not changing the familiar numbers. This made space to introduce some new tunes, among them Hugh Allen's 'Midian', William Harris's 'Alberta' and Nicholson's own 'Bow Brickhill'. *This tune is suitable for unison singing*, adds Nicholson, which neatly sums up the place parish church music had reached in 1939.

We must turn again to notice the large amount of space given from the beginning to ecumenical hymnody. Six branches of the Church in China had produced a co-operative book of 514 hymns, 452 being translations into Chinese, and 62 original Chinese. A sub-committee had met for ten days, and sung through the whole book. In Holland, significantly, an anonymous editor had obtained the assent of the Roman Catholic authorities to a co-operative venture: 'if only twenty hymns ... would that not represent a visible and audible monument to the unity of Christendom?' This courageous effort had been followed by a Catholic-Protestant hymn-singing in Groningen. The Report of the Faith and Order Conference in Edinburgh (1937) had stated that 'the Churches have hardly begun to explore the possibility of creating a more vital and a deeper unity through acquaintance with each other's modes and experiences of worship'. The World Student Christian Federation – called by Dr Philip Potter 'the pace-setter of the ecumenical movement' – had therefore produced (1930) an enlarged edition of *Cantate Domino* which was used in the World Missionary

Conference at Tambaram, Madras, in 1938.

Writers in *The British Weekly*, aware of the likelihood of a new Congregational book, were laying it upon the Society to review the possibilities of a book common to all the Churches. The Editor of the *Bulletin* pointed out that the Society entirely lacked the large amount of money required, and that such a book would not have an assured constituency. But what about the BBC, which suffered from neither disqualification? A book for use on the air was thought to be under consideration. 'The opportunity is a great one. The book ought to be generously conceived, and every care taken to achieve a great result.' Not until 1951 did it become possible to judge how fully these ideals had been achieved. It can, at any rate, be recorded here that, so far as metrical psalms and paraphrases were concerned, the compilers of *The BBC Hymn-Book* sat obediently at the feet of the Editor of the *Bulletin*. As so often, an E.R. comment made at the time still burns in the mind: 'too metropolitan' — and in a month or two there appeared *Congregational Praise*.

Let our final backward look be one of gratitude to the Hymn Society of America. It conveyed immediate assurance of co-operation in the *Julian* revision, and, when Dr Millar Patrick visited the USA to confer about it, awarded him what was in those days its highest honour by making him an honorary member, together with another 'eminent son of Scotland' Dr James Moffatt, Professor in Union Theological Seminary, translator of the Bible, and co-editor with Millar Patrick of *The Handbook to the Revised Church Hymnary*. A similar occasion, equally gracious and pleasing to both Societies, lives freshly in our minds.

In those two short years, 1937-39, 87 pages of *Bulletin* were written. They reveal the great good fortune of the Society in possessing officers able to ensure that its foundations should be so well and truly laid.