

FOUNDER OF MODERN HYMNODY

Bicentenary of Isaac Watts' Death Next Month

TWO hundred years ago, on November 25, Dr. Isaac Watts, D.D., died and was buried at Bunhill Fields, London. A statue was erected to his memory in Westminster Abbey, but he left his own living memorial in the form of several hundred hymns. About 25 of them, including "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun," are still sung to-day.

As students of literature may know, Watts was also the author of *Horae Lyricae* and other sacred and secular poems which earned him a place in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and a memoir by Robert Southey in the *Sacred Classics* series of 1834. He produced a number of catechisms and educational manuals, theological works and volumes of sermons, a treatise on *Logick* that was used for many years as a university text, and a popular handbook called *The First Principles of Geography and Astronomy Explained*.

What time did he have for other matters with all these scholarly activities on his mind? At the age of 24 he became assistant pastor (sole pastor three years later) of the Independent congregation in Mark Lane, London, and although, failing health eventually forced him to give up his ministerial duties, his congregation refused to accept his resignation, and he held the position until his death.

His father was a deacon of the Independent cause at Southampton, at a time when Dissent was illegal (the Toleration Act wasn't passed until 1689), and in the year of Isaac's birth he was imprisoned for his religious opinions in the local gaol. Isaac was offered a post at the university after he left school, but he decided to "take his lot with the Dissenters" and entered the Nonconformist Academy of Thomas Rowe at Stoke Newington. Later he acted for a while as tutor in the family of Sir John Hartopp before going to Mark Lane.

Unorthodox Views?

As an Independent minister he proved an effective and admirable preacher, in spite of his small stature and the poor health which gradually restricted his active life. As the years passed he gave fewer sermons and devoted more time to his scholarly labours, until in 1712, he retired to the household of his friend Sir Thomas Abney, a former Lord Mayor of London, who watched over him during his remaining years. Here the greater part of his writing was done. His theological books created a wide impression because of their liberal attitude, and he was apparently not untouched by the Arian controversy of those times. Indeed, one authority says he had adopted the Unitarian view at the time of his death, but there seems to be no proof that he did so. There does appear, however, to be evidence of considerable soul-searching—as there was in Milton's later years—and the suggestion of unorthodoxy should be considered less an affront to his name than a tribute to his intellectual honesty and integrity.

But it is as a hymn writer that we remember Watts these days. He began



DR. ISAAC WATTS

writing them soon after leaving Rowe's academy, the first one extant being "Behold the Wonders of the Lamb." The fact that the hymns were circulated in ms. and were given out line by line when sung raises an interesting point about Watts's position in the history of British hymnody.

After the Reformation the churches were restricted by Calvin's ban on the use in sacred worship of all music except metrical psalms and canticles, and in Queen Elizabeth's time the so-called "Old Version" of the Psalms, done into English at Geneva, was published as the official hymn book. The "New Version," by Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, appeared in 1696. Hymns were also written in the 17th Century by Milton and Jeremy Taylor, although Milton's at least were probably not intended for singing. Later attempts like Dryden's "Veni Creator" and several examples by Addison, were again hardly suitable for public singing.

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Thus we have the position (as explained in the preface of Simon Browne's hymns, published in 1720) that down to the time of Watts the only hymns known to be "in common use, either in private families or Christian assemblies," were obscure ones by Barton, Mason, and Sheppherd, apart from an attempt to turn some of George Herbert's poems into common metre. Watts's hymns provided a new outlet for the religious emotions of the English world, and it is not unjust to claim him and his followers as the founders of modern hymnody. He published his *Hymns* in 1707, and *The Psalms of David* (hymns founded on them, not translations) in 1719. By the beginning of the 19th Century 50,000 copies of these books were sold annually.

His many children's hymns were published in the volume *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, which included "I Sing the Almighty Power of God," and "Lord, how delightful 'tis to see." It became a great favourite, and went through over 100 editions. In 1728 he received his honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Aberdeen and Edinburgh universities, and for a final summing-up

of his character it would be hard to excel this passage written 30 years after death by Dr. Johnson.

Few men have left behind such purity of character, or such monuments of laborious piety. He has provided instruction for all ages, from those who are lisping their first lessons, to the enlightened readers of Malbranche and Locke; he has left neither corporal nor spiritual nature unexamined; he has taught the art of reasoning, and the science of the stars.

His character, therefore, must be formed from the multiplicity and diversity of his attainments, rather than from any single performance; for it would not be safe to claim for him the highest rank in any single denomination of literary dignity; yet perhaps there was nothing in which he would not have excelled, if he had not divided his powers to different pursuits.

The bicentenary of his death will be celebrated in England with a Watts Hymn Festival in the Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church and a special service in St. Paul's Cathedral at which the Bishop of London and representatives of the Free Churches will be present.

(Isaac Watts is to be the subject of a special commemorative broadcast which is at present in preparation. Details of the programme will be announced later.)

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