

PRESBYTERIAN WORSHIP IN ENGLAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Presbyterian Church in England was in process of formation from 1836 to 1842. Presbyterian churches had been founded in several cities and towns during the latter part of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries and had been organised in seven presbyteries.¹ Two presbyteries united to form a synod in 1836 and by 1842 this had grown to embrace the seven presbyteries. These presbyteries looked to the Church of Scotland as their mother Church and for some years there was a hope that the new synod would be adopted as a synod within the Church of Scotland. However, the synod which emerged in 1842 was the synod of an autonomous Church, the Presbyterian Church *in* England. When the Disruption of the Church of Scotland took place in 1843 the sympathies of this English Church were overwhelmingly on the side of the Free Church which was for many years the main source from which the English Church drew its ministers.² Nevertheless, it had to develop its own forms of life and work and worship. Its life had to be lived in an English environment where Presbyterianism was a minority body. Its work had to be organised to meet the needs of a thinly-spread community gathered into local churches and one of its first ventures was to found a college in London for the training of its ministers.³ Its worship had to be ordered not only to witness to Scottish connections but also to show some sensitivity to what would be fitting in England.

I. Psalms, Paraphrases and Hymns

The form and content of worship were matters of contention in the Church and in the synod. There were those who held that the reason for the existence of their Church was to be a home from home for Scots and other Presbyterians, such as those from Ireland whose Presbyterianism also owed much to Scottish influence; this was held to be sufficient reason to be satisfied with the reproduction of Scottish forms of worship in England. Others felt that the Presbyterian Church had a mission to England and that it was therefore important to avoid alienating potential English members by an inconsiderate display of Scottish peculiarities such as the doleful singing of the metrical Psalms and the custom of sitting to sing and standing to pray. The quality of the singing was not likely to sound as an earthly

echo of the praises of heaven. There were also some who thought that the inherited repertoire of praise ought to be expanded; the metrical Psalter, even when supplemented by the collection of paraphrases issued in 1781, needed further supplementing by appropriate hymns. This was the point of a petition from the presbytery of Berwick in 1841 and the synod responded by setting up a committee to keep in touch with the Psalmody committee of the Church of Scotland and to gather information about the use of "sacred poetry" in the worship of God.⁴ The only result of the enquiry was the discovery that the Church of Scotland's committee had ceased to exist.⁵ However, it was soon tacitly assumed that the need in England would not be met by adopting an extraneous work, even if it were available. In 1843 the committee reported that it had itself prepared a collection of hymns and it was decided by the synod that some specimens of the collection should be printed in a cheap form so that members might get some idea of the lines along which the selection had been made.⁶ The project was allowed to wither amid the excitement caused by the Disruption in Scotland but in 1847 a Psalmody committee was appointed to make a collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs as a supplement to the Psalter.⁷ Its convener was William Chalmers who had surrendered a lucrative parish in Scotland at the Disruption and had come to London to be the first minister of the new presbyterian church in Marylebone and he proved himself to be a leader of vision.⁸ He reported in 1848 that a collection of about two hundred and fifty hymns was being prepared but in 1849 he had to report that it would be a further year before the collection would be ready for publication.⁹ In 1850 the committee reported that it had not met during the year and the synod ordered it to meet "at an early date" and proceed to print the list of hymns and send two copies to each congregation with instructions to the session to return an annotated copy to the Convener.¹⁰ In 1851 Chalmers presented to the synod a collection of two hundred and thirty-seven hymns which he said were the cream of hymns in general use in England. It was proposed and seconded

That the Synod, while aware that a large proportion of the members of this Church feel themselves abundantly edified and comforted by the use of the Psalms and Paraphrases, is also aware that there are many congregations who, from usage or choice, are prepared to appreciate a judicious addition to the number of spiritual songs at present in use, and the Synod being willing to concede in this matter all reasonable liberty, and being also desirous of guarding

against the use of exceptionable collections, do receive the Report of the Committee, and considering the time and care expended in the preparation of the draft Hymnbook now laid by the Committee upon the Table, generally adopt the same.

The motion also asked the synod to require ministers and sessions to forward their observations on the draft to the committee which, after considering suggestions put forward, should be empowered to proceed to print without delay and to issue the book for use in congregations as ministers and congregations saw fit.

An amendment was submitted proposing that the matter be dismissed and the committee disbanded. A further amendment was submitted asking the committee to present a further revision to the next synod. A vote was taken between the two amendments and the first received seven votes, the second thirty-three. A vote was then taken between this amendment and the original motion; the original motion received fifteen votes and the amendment twenty-nine.¹¹

When the draft was considered in the presbyteries, Northumberland said the "collection included hymns which were incorrect in doctrine and sentiment, undignified in language, effeminate in tone and most defective in metrical construction" but Cumberland was more encouraging and requested a wider selection from "our evangelical brethren and the compositions of our Christian poets". Chalmers felt able to report to the Synod of 1852 that the various criticisms neutralised each other and he laid a further draft before the synod.¹² This draft was met by severe attacks as "a pitiable thing", "a miserable collection", a book "entirely unfit for use" but Chalmers made a vigorous reply and held that it was indefensible to brand as "miserable" a collection which contained the works of Cowper, Newton, Watts, Montgomery, Toplady, Kelly and Bonar, and he held that those who advocated the exclusive use of the Psalms would be the first to complain if they were ordered to use nothing but fixed forms of prayer. After a long debate during which Robert Barbour, an outstandingly generous elder of the Church, proposed that the project should proceed no further for the present, it was decided to appoint a further committee to examine the draft and report to the next synod if it was an appropriate "supplement to our Psalmody".¹³

In 1853 the committee was instructed to complete the collection of "hymns and spiritual songs" for presentation to the next synod.¹⁴ In 1854 the synod commanded the committee to

ensure that a copy of the collection would be available for discussion in each presbytery before 1st January 1855.¹⁵ The process went upon its leisurely way in 1855 when the synod instructed the presbyteries to forward their observations on the book to the committee by 1st January 1856.¹⁶ In the synod of 1856 the committee presented what it hoped would be the final form and asked for permission to publish it for “the use of such congregations of the Church as may desire it”.¹⁷ An amendment held that the book as now presented to the synod was not likely to receive the harmonious consent of the Church and there should therefore be a further attempt to prepare a collection “with due regard to variety in topic and in metre and not exceeding in number the Paraphrases already in use”. A further amendment asked that members of the synod should send their observations to the committee which should then prune the collection to one hundred and fifty hymns and then issue it for those who wished to use it. A third amendment proposed that the project be abandoned for the present. The lukewarmness of even the sponsors of the book was shown in the readiness of the committee to withdraw the motion asking for permission to publish it; forty-three then voted for dropping the project but sixty-five voted for the preparation of a limited collection of one hundred and fifty hymns.¹⁸

After what must have seemed an endless process of attrition the synod of 1857 empowered the London members of the committee to make a final selection and proceed to its publication. The synod also declared that if any congregations felt they had to use anything other than the existing psalms and paraphrases they should use the forthcoming collection.¹⁹

The collection appeared in 1857 under the title *Paraphrases and Hymns* and was a slim volume of one hundred and sixteen hymns. The main authors were Watts, Newton, Cowper, Doddridge, Montgomery, Kelly, Charles Wesley, Horatius Bonar and Toplady who between them accounted for seventy-one of the hymns. Each hymn was prefixed by a number of apposite biblical texts.

The reception given to the book was mixed, though it is likely that the loudest critics had the support of only a small minority of church members. Dr Stewart, a medical doctor who was an elder in Regent Square Church, London, differed from his minister, James Hamilton, and said the book was a chronicle of wasted time and had only slipped through the synod because of the pressure of an eager but “miserable minority” and the apathy of the majority.²⁰ Another correspondent in the

Messenger said he had no fault to find with the book but its influence would be minimal as people were not interested in raising the standard of praise but were content to have "lifeless and insipid" singing.²¹

The issue of hymnody was raised again in 1865 when the synod received an overture from James Watson, an elder in Torquay, asking for the appointment of a committee to prepare and issue a new hymnbook on the basis of an enlargement and revision of the earlier book, but a counter-motion was presented saying that the time was not expedient for such a revision and that the matter should be dropped, and Watson, sensing the mood of the synod, got leave to withdraw his motion. However, William Chalmers raised the issue again in 1866 and laid before the synod a new collection of psalms and hymns which had been prepared by an independent group of ministers and elders of the Church and the synod appointed a committee to make an immediate examination of the book. James Anderson, the redoubtable minister of Morpeth, introduced a motion on behalf of the committee indicating that the book had much merit and recommending the synod to appoint a special committee to consider suggestions for its improvement and then issue it for use in the Church. An amendment asking that the book be sent down to the presbyteries under the barrier act was defeated by a large majority.²² In 1867 the synod accepted the new book with great satisfaction and commended its use in the churches.²³ This book contained the metrical psalms and five hundred and twenty-one hymns. Forty-five of the hymns were selected portions of the 1781 collection of paraphrases. There had also been an adventurous appendix of five hymns attached to this collection of paraphrases and three out of what was called "this wretched appendix" were included in the new book. This new book was soon in use in every church in the presbytery of London and it made its way throughout the Church.²⁴

In the synod of 1881 the Nisbet publishing firm, whose founder, James Nisbet, was a leading elder in the Church, presented a memorial to the synod asking for approval of a collection of hymns which had been prepared by some ministers and elders as a supplement to the 1867 book. It was decided that before dealing with this memorial a committee should enquire into the present usage in the Church and report to the next synod what seemed necessary for the enrichment of the materials for sacred song and could be provided with the accord of the whole Church.²⁵

The convener of the committee was W. Rigby Murray of

Brunswick Street Church in Manchester and he reported to the synod of 1882 that the needs of the Church could be better met by a fully revised hymnbook than by a supplement. He also submitted the draft form of such a revision and a further special committee was set up to give an immediate assessment of the merits of the draft. This committee was convened by J. Monro Gibson of St John's Wood Church in London and it advised that the draft be approved and the book be published after taking into account observations sent in by members of the synod. The synod agreed to the proposal and also decided that the revision should also include a selection of scripture passages suitable for congregational singing.²⁶ The new book was to be called *Church Praise* and was soon ready for publication and the synod of 1883 recommended that it be used in the churches and in the homes of the people. Since the metrical psalms were still a vital part of presbyterian services the book was to be issued in two forms; in one, it was to be bound up with the complete metrical psalter, and in the other, with a selection from the metrical psalter. There were some protests against this second form as it might imply that there were some psalms or portions of psalms not suited to congregational singing but Murray claimed that the selection included "perhaps every Psalm, and every portion of a Psalm, that any minister has ever announced or any worshipper has ever sung in the House of God". In anticipation of the completion of the work on 1st July 1883 the synod discharged the committee from that date but set up a new committee to "promote the improvement of the service of praise throughout the Church".²⁷ There was, however, some delay over the terms on which Nisbet would publish the book and on which the likely profits would be divided. It had to be reported to the next synod in 1884 that these problems had held up publication and these problems could not be resolved due to the discharge of the committee by the synod in 1883. The synod speedily resolved the issues and directed the Nisbet firm to publish the book; it also gave the same company permission to issue a book for the young to be known as *School Praise*.²⁸ In 1885 the synod noted that the new book had been published and it was already a financial success and it was decided to give Murray one hundred guineas in recognition of his work on the project. By 1890 the price of the various settings of the book had been reduced and by 1898 it had been decided that the profits should be equally divided between the publisher and the Church. In 1901 the Church's share of the profits had reached £3,000 and two-thirds of this was given to the Ministers' Widows and Orphans Fund and one-third to the Aged and Infirm Ministers' Fund.²⁹

The musical editor of the book was Dr E. J. Hopkins of the Temple Church in London. The book was soon in general use in the Church. It was, for example, used for the first time in St Andrew's Church, Upper Norwood, on 13th May 1888 which was also the day when Alfred Hollins, the youthful blind organist, took up his duties as organist in that church. His impression of the book was apparently not a happy one; he had to lead the singing of the hymn, "Tell it out among the heathen that the Lord is King", and he pronounced the tune to be "a miserable ranting tune" and he almost regretted that he had left his previous position at the parish church of St John in Redhill; it was painful, he said, to have to play such "rubbish" and on an organ which was out of tune.³⁰

By 1903 the number of copies sold had risen to 760,530 and the profit accruing to the Church had risen to £25,066. Yet even as soon as 1903 there were demands within the Church for a more up-to-date hymnbook.³¹ The presbytery of Liverpool noted that some churches were adopting the *Church Hymnary* which had been prepared for use in the Church of Scotland, the United Free Church, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and the Presbyterian Churches in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; the presbytery said that if this trend continued the Presbyterian Church of England could incur financial loss through the drop in sales of *Church Praise*.³² The presbytery of Newcastle asked the synod to encourage the adoption of the *Church Hymnary* as it was a recent work suited to "the devotional spirit of our time" and its adoption would promote the sense of solidarity with other Presbyterian Churches.³³ The Presbyterian Church of England had been represented since 1894 on the committee which had prepared the *Church Hymnary* and there were some ministers and elders who felt that it had been a mistake not to adopt the book in England as soon as it had been published in 1899. Under the influences of these trends of opinion in the Church the synod of 1903 set up a committee to investigate whether it would be preferable to prepare a supplement to *Church Praise* or to encourage the adoption of the *Church Hymnary* and to find out the conditions on which it could be made available for use in England.³⁴

In the synod of 1904 there was a welter of proposals about supplements and revisions, about the *Church Hymnary*, about financial risks and about the future financial viability of *Church Praise*. The synod decided to set up another committee to consider the possibility of producing a thoroughly revised edition of *Church Praise* and it also agreed to authorise the preparation

of a revised edition of *School Praise*.³⁵ In 1905 the committee presented a draft of a revision of *Church Praise* and the synod decided that this should be published and it was left to the committee to decide whether the synod itself should publish it with all the financial risks involved or should work out a royalty arrangement with the Nisbet firm.³⁶

Murray was once again the convener of the committee but he did not live to see the work completed. J. Oswald Dykes, the Principal of Westminster College in Cambridge, and J. M. E. Ross, the minister of Redhill and Reigate, piloted the revision to its completion in 1907.³⁷ The 1883 edition had not included any metrical psalms though it was usually bound up with the psalter or with a selected group of psalms, but in 1907 seventy-two metrical psalms or portions of psalms were woven into the body of the hymnbook. J. M. E. Ross held that this would be welcomed by those to whom the metrical psalms were "if not a burden, at any rate a problem or an ingredient apprehended but slowly".³⁸ The collection also included a selection of prose psalms and anthems; a complete set of prose psalms and a wider selection of anthems would, in the view of the committee, have made the book too expensive. The musical editors were Dr F. N. A. Abernethy, organist of St John's Church, Forest Hill, and Dr J. E. Borland of St Botolph's Parish Church, Highbury. The debt to *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was obvious and was fully acknowledged by the committee. The book appeared in many sizes and bindings; editions with words only cost from sixpence to six shillings and sixpence and the best quality organ edition cost one guinea. The synod of 1909 resolved to set aside £2,900 from the profits of the hymnbook for the provision of an insurance policy which would mature in 1927 and provide £5,000 which would enable the Church to procure the full ownership of the book and also to have sufficient means to provide for a new edition.³⁹

In 1908 the synod approved the use of the Anthem Book produced by the United Free Church of Scotland and also of the complete Scottish prose psalter.⁴⁰ In 1910 the committee reported that in co-operation with the United Free Church a combined Psalter and Anthem Book had been produced.⁴¹

After the first World War there were suggestions that the time was ripe for a new hymnbook reflecting the hopes and fears and experiences of the post-war generation. In 1922 the General Assembly, as the synod was renamed in 1920, set up a committee to prepare a report on future policy and this committee reported in 1923 in favour of preparing a further new

edition of *Church Praise*; this recommendation was based on the view that the Church still needed a book designed to suit its English situation and outlook, and there was also the fact that in 1927 the Church would become the owner of *Church Praise* and would have the resources for an indigenous venture; any major shift away from *Church Praise* would involve financial loss. However, there were those who argued in favour of joining the plan to produce a book designed for the wider Presbyterian family. R. C. Gillie of Marylebone Church and James Reid of Eastbourne Church held that while the English Church had its own ethos its worship should highlight the common faith of the whole Church rather than regional features and they urged the Assembly to share with the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland, Ireland and the Commonwealth in preparing a new hymnbook. This amendment to the committee's recommendation was carried by one hundred and seventy-six votes to one hundred and sixty and then became the positive decision of the Assembly by an even larger majority.⁴² In 1925 Gillie reported that the committee representing the Scottish, Irish, Welsh and English Presbyterian Churches had been at work and many English suggestions had been adopted and the draft of the new book could almost be regarded as a revision of *Church Praise*. Despite the desire of a number of members to withdraw from the plan the Assembly approved the draft of the words in the revised book and authorised the continuation of the joint project with the recommendation that if the music chosen for the words was approved by a future Assembly the book should then become the authorised hymnbook of the Church.⁴³ The Scottish Churches intended to bind the new book with the complete metrical psalter but the English Assembly was agreed that it would not adopt this method which had been the method in the English book of 1883 and had been abandoned in the *Church Praise* of 1907. The Assembly held there were portions of the psalter quite unsuitable for Christian worship but the metrical psalms were part of the Presbyterian tradition and it would therefore be necessary to prepare a special English supplement of selected metrical psalms, prose psalms and canticles.⁴⁴ This involved the Church in additional expenditure but Gillie persuaded the Assembly of 1926 that important as financial considerations were they were nevertheless secondary and should not be allowed to stand in the way of a hymnbook for the Presbyterian family.⁴⁵ The committee admitted that the adoption of the new book would not be so financially advantageous to the Church as would the publications of a new edition of *Church Praise* but the Assembly of 1927 finally decided to support the preparation of

the *Revised Church Hymnary* with an English supplement and to authorise its use in the congregations of the Church.⁴⁶ This brought to an end the seventy-year period during which English Presbyterianism used a hymnbook of its own in the services of the Church.

(To be continued)

NOTES

1. *Digest of the Actings and Proceedings of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church in England, 1836-76* (arranged by Leoni Levi, 1877), ch. 1.
2. Ibid. See also R. B. Knox, *Westminster College, Cambridge*, 2.
3. Knox, op. cit., 2.
4. *Minutes of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church in England* (hereafter referred to as EPM), 1841, 20.
5. EPM, 1842, 29.
6. EPM, 1843, 34.
7. EPM, 1847, 16.
8. Knox, op. cit., 7-8.
9. EPM, 1848, 16; 1849, 25.
10. EPM, 1850, 15.
11. EPM, 1851, 19. *Presbyterian Messenger* (the monthly magazine of the Church, hereafter referred to as M), 1851, 151.
12. M, 1852, 122-3.
13. EPM, 1852, 17-18; M, 1852, 176-8.
14. EPM, 1853, 65.
15. EPM, 1854, 101.
16. EPM, 1855, 141.
17. EPM, 1855, 166.
18. EPM, 1856, 166.
19. EPM, 1857, 202.
20. M, 1857, 354; see W. Arnot, *Life of James Hamilton* (1878); Knox, op. cit., 6.
21. M, 1859, 114.
22. EPM, 1866, 163-5; M, 1866, 154, 156: Anderson was the first Moderator of the synod of the Presbyterian Church of England which was formed in 1876 by the union of the Presbyterian Church in England and the English churches of the United Presbyterian Church: M, special issue on "The Union Synod", 23.
23. EPM, 1867, 215-6; M, 1867, 165.
24. M, 1867, 165, 285.
25. EPM, 1881, 314-5.
26. EPM, 1882, 591.
27. EPM, 1883, 22-23, 34-35, 238-9.
28. EPM, 1884, 363, 562.
29. EPM, 1901, 35, 262.
30. A. Hollins, *A Blind Musician looks back* (Edinburgh, 1936), 179. Another example from the book began
 Weary of earth and laden with my sin
 I look to heaven and long to enter in.
31. M, 1903, 159.
32. EPM, 1903, 1143.
33. EPM, 1903, 1144.
34. EPM, 1903, 784-5.
35. EPM, 1904, 37-39, 295.
36. EPM, 1905, 441-3, 689, 694.

37. EPM, 1907, 32, 331-8; Knox, op. cit., 10, 21.
38. EPM, 1908, 535-6, 833-7.
39. EPM, 1909, 995, 1023.
40. EPM, 1908, 530.
41. EPM, 1910, 374.
42. EPM, 1922, 65; 1923, 399.
43. EPM, 1925, 56-59, 213.
44. EPM, 1925, 58; M, 1925, 35, 45.
45. EPM, 1926, 141, 241; M, 1926, 43.
46. EPM, 1927, 857, 1003; M, 1925, 157, 159.

R. BUICK KNOX,
Westminster College,
Cambridge CB3 0AA.