

ISAAC WATTS: A ROUNDED LIFE

HORACE alleges that a writer whose works outlast a century is one of standard worth. That is not invariably the case; for posthumous fame is rather capricious in its distribution of awards. The widespread recognition, however, recently accorded to the memory of "the father of English hymnody" upon the bicentenary of his death does certainly indicate an abiding appreciation of the merits of this interesting figure in the annals of British nonconformity; nor can it be amiss briefly to scrutinise his life-work or to cast an eye on his diversified literary performances.

Watts's career was spent in comparative seclusion and presents in itself few salient features; for he never travelled farther than to Bath or Tunbridge Wells, and his ministerial labours were broken by ill-health and not exceptionally popular. Nor did he ever meddle actively in politics, like some of his contemporaries, but remained all his days an assiduous student and religious moralist of his own make and pattern, a link in some respects between the residuary elements of waning Puritanism and the buoyant energies of the Methodist renaissance. Both John and Charles Wesley paid him a ceremonious visit in his latter years.

Isaac first saw the light in 1674 in the very bosom of that sturdy Independency which had prevailed among Cromwell's Ironsides, and to which his father had clung in the inglorious *débâcle* of the Restoration. The mother had Huguenot blood in her veins; and his grandmother, from whom his first lessons in the *Shorter Catechism* were imbibed, was the widow of one of Blake's naval officers, a draughtsman and man of musical taste who had lost his life while serving against the Dutch. But the hierarchy of the reascendant Church of England were now busy, with the aid of the civil power, inflicting revengeful pains and penalties on the sectaries by whom they had been so sorely humbled. At the date of Isaac's birth his sire (then newly married) was a fugitive from his home in Southampton, hidden in London from the bishops' pursuivants, ever lying in wait to arrest Dissenting pastors and to impose heavy fines or heavier fetters on church members intrepid enough (as was the deacon

Watts senior) to avow their Dissent. We are not surprised therefore to learn that he fell a prey to their machinations, and was consigned for a season to the local jail. Isaac was the eldest of a highly intelligent family of nine children. One of his brothers became a physician and another chose the sea for his calling. It is manifest that the early memories of Anglican oppression inspired him with an unwaning attachment to the cause of Independency, ratified, as his lucid exposition of its principles at his ministerial induction shows, by personal conviction. His father's influence told no doubt upon so dutiful a son; for he was a man of gifts, who in subsequent days kept a large boarding-school at Southampton and, notwithstanding his early sufferings in the cause of religious liberty, lived to a very advanced age, a respected member of the society in which he moved.

His firstborn, however, proved a bairn of weakly physique and rather pigmy stature. The *praenomen* Isaac was a favourite at that period, as the designations of Isaac Barrow and Isaac Newton show; and our Isaac answered to the appellation in a remarkable degree. For the lad was of a quiet, retiring disposition from childhood, far more addicted to books than boyish pranks and caperings. We seem to see the busy little Watts culling honey all the day from every opening flower. When sent by his father to Southampton Grammar School, his studious tendencies grew all-absorbing. He imbibed Latin in lavish, and Greek and Hebrew in lesser, doses and took kindly to all branches of knowledge within his reach, till he won at fifteen the proud position of *dux* of the school. By this time "the glorious Revolution", entailing the expulsion of the Stuarts and the accession of William of Orange, was bringing welcome relief to the harassed Dissenters, and a serener prospect opened before so promising a scholar. Had he conformed to the National Church there were not lacking those who would have defrayed his university expenses; but the godly associations he had learned to prize found their congenial *milieu* in the ranks of nonconformity, from which he could never be bribed to swerve. An autobiographical fragment shows that he passed through a spiritual crisis about this period, though it was not till he was eighteen that his deliberate cast of mind prompted him to join the membership of a London Congregational church. For, on leaving school, he had begun to look forward to the ministry as his future vocation; and with that goal looming before his vision,

in default of a university course which might have ended in the "sleepy hollow" of a college fellowship, he resorted to Mr. Rowe's academy at Stoke Newington as his scholastic palaestra. The choice was a sagacious one; for Thomas Rowe was a scion of a pious Devonshire family, and his father had been a tutor at Oxford and preacher at Westminster Abbey in the era of the Commonwealth. Both father and son were well-furnished theologians; and the amiable carriage of the youthful principal, tolerant of differences of opinion and teaching his pupils to look abroad and "call no man master", must have harmonised happily with Isaac's pacific temper and inquisitive intellect. In such a congenial atmosphere we espy him "working like a Trojan" for three years' space, studying systematic theology, ethics and logic apace, and amassing a fair amount of mathematics and miscellaneous knowledge to boot. For his Calvinistic instructor was himself a student of Descartes and Locke, whose *Essay* had just come out; and from him Watts derived that strong predilection for analysis and logical system which characterises his didactic treatises and sermons. He made copious abstracts of the chief text-books he read during this strenuous course of instruction, and acknowledged his debt to Rowe as well as his old schoolmaster by odes in Latin verse.

Precocious from the first and with a passion for general culture second only to his Christian faith, the young man returned in 1694 to his father's house, well equipped, though in his own judgment too juvenile, for the stated ministry of the Word. The Congregational church frequented by his kinsfolk had a pastor ejected from All Saints, Southampton, in 1662. Here then Isaac worshipped and here his attention was drawn to the deficiencies of the Psalmody in use. He had toyed with verse from his boyhood; indeed a knack for versification ran in the family. Modest as was his estimate of his own abilities, he could not but be conscious of the acquisitions he had made and the development of his latent powers in progress; and at this stage of inaction the task of improving the church's service of praise attracted his alert and not unaspiring spirit. The announced publication of a new version of the Psalms by Tate and Brady may have stimulated him to suggest another alternative than a mere amendment of the old version. His father seems to have spurred him on in the enterprise of supplying suitable hymns after the sermon, wherewith to close the service. His first essay,

Behold the glories of the Lamb, bore such a character, and being found acceptable, was succeeded by others. The common tradition runs that *There is a land of pure delight* was one of these earlier compositions, and that it borrowed its vivid imagery from the prospect of Southampton Water, bounded by the verdant meads of the Isle of Wight. Common metre was adopted, after the example of Sternhold, in imitation of old ballads, such as *Chevy Chase*, which appealed to the common ear; and their familiar style was to some extent copied. But ten years elapsed ere these effusions had accrued to the bulk of an hymn-book.

The next two years the young man spent at home in an ailing state of health, aggravated by over-study, not without fits of pensive longing for what he terms his "grand release" and removal to that better clime where sickness is unknown. The references in his writings to "dull mortality" and "this prison of flesh" find their explanation in his bodily infirmities. At this period he aspired to what has been wittily dubbed "the elegant imbecility" of Latin verse; for alongside of his classical favourites he prized the "Polish swan" Casimir and the Scottish Buchanan's Latin version of the Psalms. The most graceful of these pieces, which have considerable merit, is that addressed to his nautical brother Enoch upon his embarkation for a distant port, wishing him a prosperous voyage; and the most elaborate, and, we may add, presumptuous, a sonorous Ode in Alcaics, extending to eighty-four lines, laid at the feet of Jesus Christ! The latest of these Latin poems chants the praises of Sir John Hartopp, an Independent baronet, under whose hospitable roof Watts, already a semi-invalid, spent the next six years in the capacity of tutor to his son, preaching now and then as his feeble health permitted.

We have dwelt somewhat at length upon Watts's earlier biography, because these were his formative years and their influence permanent. For the remainder of his course proved singularly uneventful, although the valetudinarian lived on through another half-century. It may as well be summarised at once. In 1702 he was called to the pastorate of the church in Bury Street, when we find him definitely renouncing secular for sacred poetry. A colleague however had soon to be provided for his pulpit, so often was he laid aside. The first edition of his *Horae Lyricae* appeared in 1706 and of his hymns in 1707; but the entire collection, including his adaptation of the Psalter,

carried till 1719. In 1712 an acute attack of sickness well nigh put an end to his regular ministry. For the residue of his lifetime he enjoyed a permanent domicile in the stately mansion of Sir Thomas Abney, a prosperous Dissenter who became Lord Mayor and M.P. for the City of London, and was owner not only of a newly built house in grounds at Stoke Newington, near the site where Abney Park Cemetery now extends, but also of an old country-seat near Cheshunt. Here Watts (for he never married) enjoyed the tranquil seclusion he craved and had scope to employ his innate talent as a man of letters and Christian essayist antagonising Deism. Sir Thomas died in 1722; but his widow continued to relieve Watts of domestic cares to the close of his days, in 1748; no slight proof surely both of her amicable disposition and of her recluse's own congeniality of temper. Despite his thorn in the flesh, we may say of him that his heritage was allotted with loving-kindness by "the Master of our pleasures and our pains".

Our remaining task, to appraise the services of Watts to religion and mental improvement, is not without its difficulties. Dr. Johnson admits him within the groves of his Parnassus, but entertains a disparaging estimate of his religious poetry. For our parts, we should reverse this verdict; for we do not set a very high rate on the promiscuous poems included in his *Horae Lyricae*. They leave no phrases imprinted on the memory, unless it be in his piquant repartee to a jeerer at his diminutive appearance about the mind being the measure of the man. He himself regarded them as relaxations, not intentions, of his mental faculties; not works, but pastimes. The most passionate consists of a vindication of his (and Macaulay's) hero, King William, regarded as the champion of freedom against the tyrannical aggressions of Louis XIV. We trace reminiscences of Waller, Marvell and Milton, to whom he pays a glowing tribute, and recognise smoothness of verse and lucidity and dignity of expression. But the funeral elegies interspersed are much too prolix; Watts (for he read French authors) would have done well to lay Boileau's dictum to heart: *qui ne sait se borner ne sut jamais écrire*. The truth was that he had grown up in the school of Cowley, whose absurdly overrated poetry retained its ascendancy for almost half-a-century. Watts did not indeed copy Cowley's forced conceits, but the *Pindaric Odes* (so called) exercised a strong fascination over him. In inferior hands they

became a sort of poetical steeplechase *à bride abattue*, dithyrambic in style and dishevelled in metre; in form a bombastic rhapsody padded out with personifications; in quality "decoctions of a barley-water muse", a sort of prose run mad, affecting Bacchic frenzy. Dryden alone, in his *Alexander's Feast* and *Cecilian Ode*, attained a mastery over this unbridled measure. The *Horae Lyricae* however shed light on sundry traits of their youthful minstrel, such as his ardent zeal for civil and intellectual freedom, enhanced no doubt by Locke's *Letters on Toleration*. "I hug dear liberty in both my arms," he cries. They also manifest his sociable temperament, wherever he meets with a kindred spirit. He was especially drawn to the surviving Cromwellian group, a kind of Dissenting aristocracy at that epoch in London. The bluestocking Miss Singer (Mrs. Rowe), towards whom some think that in her maiden days he cherished warmer feelings, belonged to this circle. One poem pays homage to John Howe, who survived as late as 1705. The keynote of these moral versifications is unworldly aspiration, conceiving of heaven as the soul's homeland and of earth as a foreign strand; and the sacred poetry prefixed serves to fill in the picture they sketch in outline. In the preface Watts avows his lofty design of rescuing verse from the hands of its contaminators and transferring it from the service of vice to that of virtue.

We turn then to his hymnology proper. It is not our province to canvass the legitimacy of its introduction into public worship, round which a hot controversy raged for a good while under the stout leadership of a brother Congregationalist, Thomas Bradbury; for we have the greatest respect for the Psalm-singing churches which still adhere in this particular to the practice of their Reformed forefathers. All we ask is that they would allow to others that right of private judgment which, conscientiously exercised, constitutes one of the main pillars of Protestantism. Watts at any rate was convinced (as the churchman Barton and the Baptist Keach had already been) that the current service of praise demanded renovation. The incorrigible mediocrity of the Psalm-versions in use offended his taste and tended to repel persons of more refinement than piety from true religion. A movement was afoot by this time in Geneva itself to admit paraphrases as well as Psalms into the worship of the sanctuary, a proposal that took effect after some retardations in the Church of Scotland. Watts's hymns themselves were in

essence expansions of Scriptural passages. The Lutheran Church had gloried from her birth in trophies of sacred poesy. Luther's *Christ lag in Todesbunden* and his spiritual *Marseillaise*, *Ein' feste Burg*, were of incalculable service to the cause of the Reformation. And had not Gerhardt's *Befehl du deine Wege* and *Was Gott gefällt, mein frommes Kind*, chased away the brooding gloom engendered by the Thirty Years War from thousands of weary hearts? Had not the seal of Divine approval been set on this form of Christian testimony? May we not allege that a Gospel hymn has again and again counteracted the baleful influence of a gospelless pulpit? Were not Watts's hymns of service in maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy for more than a century among the bulk of English Independents and Baptists? And has not a noted modern hymnist, T. H. Gill, recorded how he was weaned from icy Unitarianism by the glow of those hymns?

It was as a humble paraphrast that Watts sallied forth. His hymnology has little affinity with the tawdry sentimentalism or unwholesome vein of self-analysis which disfigure too many modern hymnifications. Even his spiritualisation of the Song of Songs displays far less exuberance than many of Quarles's *Emblems* or some passages in Rutherford's *Letters*. Yet the sublimation of *Eros* to *Agape*, of sensuous to holy love, is surely a laudable ideal. Sternhold's original Psalter was avowedly designed to supplant amorous ditties of profligate tendency, couched in the common ballad metre which became that of psalms and hymns, a measure the limitations of which Watts himself has remarked. Why was it adopted? Because these compositions were meant for "vulgar Christians", plain unlettered worshippers, to whom that familiar score appealed. A certain colloquialism of diction, in which *come* and *go* and *can't* and *won't* figure, and a looseness of rime, samples of which however abound in Pope, were in keeping with the popular aim in view. Latinisms, such as obscure the line, "*Infinite* day *excludes* the night", do occur, but form a mere residuum in comparison with the pedantries of the preceding century. The vocabulary cleaves fast to our mother-tongue, and in verbal simplicity realises strength and force.

No one had fully succeeded in adapting "the carols and hearse-like strains", as Bacon styles them, of the sweet singer of Israel to English rhythms. But Watts's *Psalms*, which saw the light along with his enlarged hymn-book in 1719, are

confessedly no translations, but a Messianic interpretation of the Psalter for Christian worship. Many of them, though more harmonious than their rugged predecessors, are fatally prosaic. Yet ever and anon who can deny that Watts has caught the spirit of his model? Thus his alembic distils from the seventy-second Psalm the popular missionary chant, *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun*; and from the ninetieth a strain that touches a universal chord and is become almost a national anthem: *O God our help in ages past*. From the next Psalm we get the robust stanzas beginning *He that hath made his refuge God*, from the succeeding one *Sweet is the work, my God, my King* and from Ps. cxlvi, *I'll praise my Maker with my breath*. His love of the sanctuary emulates that of David himself; witness *How pleased and blest was I* (Ps. cxxii.), duplicated in *Lord of the worlds above*, and *How pleasant, how divinely fair*, a transposition of Ps. lxxxiv.

The hymns proper number some 500 in all, a tenth of the prolific lays of Charles Wesley. In such extensive collections not a few could well be spared; some examples of downright bathos cannot but grate on a critical taste. Yet an esteemed artist is not judged by his least successful pictures. We admire his best and leave his worst in merited oblivion. It is to be borne in mind that Watts's minstrelsies are *effusions* of a pioneer, plunging *in medias res* without preface, not artificial centos pasted deftly together. Such soul-outpourings entail "the defects of their qualities". Nor let their originality of conception in the main be overlooked.

What are the broad features of these new songs of the new covenant?

(1) We recognise therein a profound *sense of the Divine Majesty*. In such strains as *God is a Name my soul adores* or *Great God, how infinite art Thou!* the poet's spirit bows in lowliest adoration before the King immortal, eternal, invisible, the *God alone* of Jude's doxology. The writer recalls how, when quite a little lad, he gained his earliest notion of the sublime from Watts's plaintive ejaculation in a hymn now wholly set aside:

O 'tis beyond a creature-mind
To think a thought half-way to God!

How suffused with this godly fear is that close-packed verse:

Within Thy circling power I stand,
On every side I find Thy hand:

Awake, asleep, at home, abroad,
I am surrounded still with God (Ps. cxxxix).

(2) A heartfelt *Appreciation of the Glory of Redemption*. On that theme Watts's diction waxes nervous and his emotion impassioned. We feel his throbbing pulse as he exclaims,

Alas! and did my Saviour bleed
And did my Sovereign die?

or pens *When I survey the wondrous cross*, or

Let everlasting glories crown
Thy head, my Saviour and my Lord,

or *Come, let us join our cheerful songs, Join all the glorious names* and others of that stamp. It is with no listless arm that he draws water from the wells of salvation, with no tearless eye that he traces "the golden track of love", as he terms it, or crowns Immanuel with all His regalia. Not are any of the sisterhood of Christian graces neglected in his compass of song. Penitence and faith have their place in *Not all the blood of beasts* and love in *Happy the soul where graces reign* and *Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove*; fortitude its encomium in *I'm not ashamed to own my Lord* and *Am I a soldier of the cross?* and aspiration its prevailing hour in

Father, I long, I faint to see
The place of Thine abode:
I'd leave Thine earthly courts and flee
Up to Thy seat, my God!

(3) For another marked characteristic meets our gaze in his wistful *musings on the heavenly state*. His verse and sermons on the heavenly state and *World to Come* alike bear witness to the ardent yearning for immortality of a soul "clogged with flesh", athirst for an unsinning and painless land of bliss, where he would "bathe his weary soul in seas of heavenly rest".¹ It breaks forth in *Give me the wings of faith to rise* and *There is a house not made with hands*, or *Earth has engrossed my love too long*. And to how many dying lips besides those of William Carey and Daniel Webster have not his tender outpourings risen as the last utterance

¹ Watts eschews rhetorical artifices, except that of putting hosts of questions to his hearers, but, in contemplation of the full expansion of love above, he rises to a strain of real eloquence at the close of his discourses on Love to God (Wks. II, 353, 4). Argument with him usually precludes ornament.

of sinking nature in prospect of eternity! There is an exquisite simplicity about Watts's monody on the death of Moses:

In God's own arms he left his breath
That God's own Spirit gave;
His was the noblest road to death,
And his the sweetest grave.

Nor is the music of *Unveil thy bosom, faithful tomb!* less piercing than Handel's requiem over Saul. We do not greatly wonder that C. H. Spurgeon, whose childish memory had been stored with Watts's hymns, should have quoted them with such loving familiarity to the multitudes he preached to; for through their refrains Isaac, like Abel, "being dead yet speaketh" across two centuries of changefulness and upheaval. Into his greatest hymns the singer put his whole soul.

We have left ourselves scant space to review the prose writings of our author, to which Dr. Johnson obviously assigns the palm, when he credits him with having taught Dissenters "elegance of style". No doubt the same thing might be said of Cowley or Addison and Steele, the patterns which Watts chiefly copied. But the ascendant influence was of course the French model of composition, so much more pellucid than the involved periods of our elder writers. *L'esprit français n'aime pas les nuages*; and Watts caught that spirit betimes. Clarity of diction and symmetry of presentation were the commodities in demand, and these became almost his fetish, and inscrutabilities a challenge to his powers of elucidation. His printed sermons, revised a year or two before his death, sufficiently attest his evangelical orthodoxy; but his unwarranted speculation touching the pre-existence prior to the Incarnation of Christ's human soul, based partly on strained interpretations of one or two Biblical texts, was a quest of the unsearchable and unrevealed, undertaken with the charitable aim of conciliating those Arian tendencies which were threatening to rend the ranks of nonconformity asunder. Watts had probably listened in his student days to Howe's lectures on "the carnality of religious contention", mediating so congenial to his temper, ever eager to "lend a helping hand to those who have missed their footing". His *theologeme*, to borrow Rabbi Duncan's phrase, was propounded tentatively as a conceivable *via media*, not as his own fixed conviction; in his own words, "to lead such as deny the proper

Deity of Christ to the belief of that article". He was of opinion that to convince an opponent of his error it is expedient to "come as near him as you can and yield to him as much as you dare". However well-meant this inclusive attitude may have been, it proved altogether futile; nor was anything gained thereby save the reprimand of those seclusive stalwarts who, in concert with the churchman Waterland, were standing in the breach manfully and stemming the encroaching flood. According to so strict a censor as Charles Hodge,¹ Watts's explicit Dissertation elsewhere on the Trinity coincides with the Church doctrine; and the author of that chant in honour of the Eternal Son, *Ere the blue heavens were stretched abroad*, and of nineteen Trinitarian doxologies, one of which ends,

Where reason fails with all its powers,
There faith prevails and love adores,

and who protested, "I am fully established in the belief of the Deity of the Blessed Three", was assuredly no anti-Trinitarian, though he mistakenly dallied with the Platonist Henry More's archetypal theory of the manhood of Jesus. "Moderation must expect a box on both ears" is his own comment on his imprudent intervention. But cleavages may be radical and compromises patchwork, as in this instance the event manifested.

We must remember that Watts was sensitive to the spirit of his age and that he lived in a century whose shibboleth was "common sense", intolerant of mysteries and prone to overrate the powers of "right reason". Docile to the plain teaching of inspiration, he was yet resolved to prove all things provable with slender veneration for merely human authorities. No doubt truth is to be sought at all costs; but he sometimes fails to perceive how soon finite reason may get out of its depth in the plumbless ocean of infinity. And so he beats the bars of his cage at times impatiently when he cannot effect an exit into that translucent ether after which he panted, chafing, as it were, to become a bird of paradise out of due season and ere his time.

The family crest he commends, *labor ipse voluptas*, might have been his own device; for in his retirement he observed his own counsel to let no day pass without some intellectual gain. His hours never ran to waste, and he acquired the status latterly of the mentor and Christian moralist of his generation. As an

¹ *Systematic Theology*, II, 423.

instructor his qualifications were signal, less profound perhaps than versatile, but sedulously turned to account. Themes high and low attracted his attention. Bachelor though he was, he tasked himself in writing "Moral Songs" and composing infant catechisms couched in the simplest language; and for maturer understandings drew up his valuable *Logic*, which can still be recommended to loose thinkers as a mental tonic, studded with religious illustrations. It won him a doctorial degree, and pushed its way into the universities as a recognised text-book. All his precision of method and luminosity of presentation adorn this performance. From the discussion of perception and judgment he advances to the dissection of syllogisms and a most searching exposure of the sophisms of prejudice. His other tutorial manual on *The Improvement of the Mind* is even more comprehensive, and reveals remarkable keenness of insight, analytical skill and aptitude for mental and moral philosophy. It gathers up the lessons of his own scholastic training and subsequent meditations on self-discipline. To grow in knowledge or exchange an obscure idea for a clear one was to him "an angelic pleasure". The second part treats of communicating knowledge and discusses style and instruction, preaching and training of the young. We have no space to dilate on his lively moral apologues, his excursions into the realms of metaphysics and Newtonian astronomy or his extensive correspondence. His friendship with Doddridge is well known; but letters also passed between him and Francke and Zinzendorf in Germany and Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards in New England.

How shall we sum up a life of such uniform tenor and varied interest? To our thinking there presided over his mental processes an ideal of judicial impartiality, an even-handed umpirage determined by the preponderance of evidence, which sought to weigh propositions with the nicest acumen, ever on its guard against warping bias and party-spirit. That temper of mind might easily have issued in a "benevolent neutrality" with regard to revealed religion. But it was happily coupled with a firm Biblical faith centred in the Gospel of the grace of God in Christ and a vigorous spiritual-mindedness which, while it gave generous scope to the exercise of reason, set love to God in the supreme place, and next to that, love to his fellow-men, for whose welfare of soul and sanity of mind he laboured with such indefatigable zeal.

Having thus lived a "rounded life", as we have styled it, and served his generation to a good old age according to his Lord's will, he fell asleep peacefully, resting, as he put it, on the promises of the Gospel and "waiting God's leave to die". It is not for us to follow his flight to those coasts of light where the baffling problems that haunted his exploring intellect find their solution, as he conceived, in ever widening zones of irradiation; but we are sure that his wistful aspiration in earlier days was not unfulfilled at the last:

Clasped in my heavenly Father's arms
I would forget my breath,
And lose my life amid the charms
Of so divine a death.

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