

“My Country, 'Tis of Thee”
(“America”)
and
“The Morning Light Is Breaking”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

TWO WELL-KNOWN hymns have come to us from one author in one year. The national hymn, *My Country 'Tis Of Thee*, and the missionary hymn, *The Morning Light is Breaking*, head the lists of hymns in their respective categories. The author, Samuel Francis Smith (1808-1895), was a twenty-four-year-old divinity student when he wrote these hymns. Although Smith wrote many other hymns throughout his long and active life, these two far exceed all others in popularity.

Samuel F. Smith was born on October 21, 1808, in the north end of Boston within hearing distance of the bell of Old North Church where the lanterns that signaled the start of Paul Revere's ride had hung in the same steeple just thirty-two years earlier. An inherent poetical inclination won young Samuel frequent honors in student days. After graduating from Harvard in the same class with Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1829, he went on to Andover Theological Seminary. It was while a student at Andover that Smith wrote both of these excellent hymns.

At this time, Lowell Mason was busily engaged in promot-

ing the study of music among the children of Boston. Mr. Mason had just received several German books from Europe. Since he did not know the German language, he gave the books to his young friend, Samuel Smith, who was quite a linguist. He requested that Smith translate any song which was suitable for children and use any good tune for an original hymn or song which he might write.

We are fortunate to have a description of the circumstances surrounding the composition of this hymn from the author himself: "One dismal day in February about half an hour before sunset, I was turning over the leaves of one of the music books when my eyes rested on the tune which is now known as *America*. I liked the spirited movement of it, not knowing it at that time to be *God Save the King*. I glanced at the words and saw they were patriotic and instantly felt the impulse to write a patriotic hymn of my own, adapted to the tune. Picking up a scrap of waste paper which lay near me, I wrote at once, probably within half an hour, the hymn *America* as it now known everywhere. I gave the song soon afterward to Mr. Ma-

son, together with others, and thought no more of it."

The hymn was first sung at the historic Park Street Church in Boston on July 4, 1832, by a children's choir directed by Lowell Mason. It is fitting that Mr. Mason who did so much to promote the study of music by children and who did more than any other man to improve church music in America should have such an integral part in the making of this national hymn. Today many young music students use *My Country 'Tis of Thee* as their first practice piece. The prayer of the last stanza is as pertinent today as it was to the fifty-year-old nation of 1832:

*Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light.
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.*

Although Smith had over sixty years of active service for God and man, his claim to permanent fame rests upon his authorship of "America." As his famous classmate, Oliver Wendell Holmes, wrote in a poem composed far their thirtieth class reunion:

*And there's a nice youngster of
excellent pith,—
Fate tried to conceal him by
naming him Smith.
But he shouted a song for the brave
and the free,—
Just read on his medal,
“My Country,” “of Thee!”*

The prospect of Christian service on the foreign field motivated Samuel Smith in his studies at Andover Seminary. In his last year of study at the school reports arrived from Adoniram Judson in Burma telling of a great work of God in that place. After years of ceaseless toil with discouraging results, Mr. Judson wrote that the light was break-

**"My Country 'Tis of Thee" and
"The Morning Light is
Breaking"**

ing and hundreds were accepting Christ as their Savior. The reports set Samuel Smith aflame with missionary zeal, and he wrote the triumphant missionary hymn, *The Morning Light is Breaking*.



Samuel Francis Smith

Although Samuel Smith never became a foreign missionary himself, it is interesting to note that his son went as a missionary to Burma, following in Adoniram Judson's steps. Smith himself did visit the foreign fields all over the world and had the joy of hearing the hymn which was inspired by the salvation of the natives of Burma sung by those very same enlightened natives.

Thus it was that Samuel F. Smith was used to write two great hymns, the one national, singing the praises of the earthly nation of which he was a devoted, patriotic citizen; the other, as it were, international, singing the praises of the heavenly nation of which he was an equally devoted citizen and whose domain he earnestly endeavored to extend among "all the nations... till all the holy
"Proclaim 'The Lord is come!'"