

John B. Dykes — Inspired Composer

BY ROBERT D. KALIS

“SOME hymn-tunes are Holy Ghost tunes, some verses are Holy Ghost inspired, too. *Jesus the Very Thought of Thee* is an exquisite example of this.”

This enlightening observation was made to a young student of hymnology by Martha Wing Robinson. The words of this inspired hymn came to us via translation from a Latin poem by the saintly Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153 A.D.). The music was composed by John B. Dykes, who was born March 10, 1823, exactly 150 years ago.

His greatest contribution to the hymnody of the Christian church was the impetus he and his colleagues created toward giving every hymn its own suitable tune. Previously, it had been the practice to sing the given hymn to any tune with a suitable meter. The minister of music or the organist would choose the tune. Words and music were in separate books. The result was that often the style of the tune did not fit the words at all. Today, in our hymnals each hymn has its own music, often composed especially for that hymn. John B. Dykes and the men with whom he worked are largely responsible for this improvement.

John was the fifth child and third son of nine boys and five girls born to William and Elizabeth Dykes in Kingston-upon-Hull, England. His grandfather, Rev. Thomas Dykes, was the evangelical pastor of St. John's church in Kingston-on-Hull for fifty-seven years and a friend of the famous William Wilberforce,

prime mover for the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and her possessions. His father was a very successful banker. The home was a very happy one.

John was gifted musically and easily and early learned to play the piano and organ by ear. An aunt saw to it that he learned to read notes. He studied violin and piano, and at the age of ten sometimes accompanied the singing at his grandfather's church. When the family moved to Wakefield in 1841, the church at Hull gave John, then seventeen years old, a gold watch and chain in recognition of his service of music.



John B. Dykes.

His musical abilities and service also were rewarded by a scholarship to Cambridge University Music Society. While at the school, he heard Mendelssohn's *Elijah* which made a profound impression on him. As a result, the composer, still living at that time, became a favorite of young Dykes, and his influence is sometimes noticeable in Dyke's hymn-tunes. During these student days, Dykes also had the privilege to hear the incomparable Jenny Lind. His praise of her singing was unbounded.

John's own musical energies were dedicated to humor and wit. His funny and witty compositions made him very popular. But, upon graduation, when he entered the ministry at Malton, Yorkshire, he renounced forever the frivolity which characterized his college days.

About one year later, in 1848, he was ordained and appointed an assistant minister at Durham Cathedral. There, as the minister of music (precentor), his considerable talents were put to good use. In 1850, he was married to Susan Kingston and brought her to his cottage, named Hollingside. One of his early hymn-tunes was named for that cottage.

When Dykes heard of the contemplated publication of a new hymnal in 1860, he ventured to send, unsolicited, several tunes for consideration. Seven tunes were gratefully accepted for the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, which remains to this day one of the great standard English hymnals. Twelve more tunes were

published in the appendix of this important hymnal.

Two of those seven tunes are still in common use: *Melita*, to which *Almighty Father, Strong to Save* is still sung, and *Nicaea*, which is the only tune to which Reginald Heber's beautiful hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* is ever sung. It has been said that hymns have taught more doctrine than sermons, and that this hymn in particular has taught the doctrine of the Trinity more than all the sermons on that subject. Dykes himself wrote to Professor Wm. H. Monk, musical editor for the new hymnal:

"I know so well the teaching power of hymns, if they are happily wedded, that I am anxious to do my best (as far as God is pleased to help me), to add to the number of those useful . . . unions. My own desire is this: that each hymn should be so set to music that its power of influencing and teaching may be best brought out."

Fifty-five tunes by Dykes were used in the several editions of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Of these, at least four more besides the two already mentioned are in popular use. Although the young minister's duties increased with the birth of his children and his promotion to be pastor of the small church of St. Oswald, Durham, he continued his hymn-tune work in his spare time. Here he wrote the

music for Dean Alford's hymn *Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand*. This tune, titled *Alford*, is the one to which we still sing that majestic hymn. *Vox Dilecti* is the name for the music written especially for Horatio Bonar's hymn *I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*. The difficult change from the minor key to the major was intended to emphasize the different parts in the hymn — the minor key for the Lord's invitation, and the major key for the man's response.

The tune for Newman's *Lead Kindly Light* came to Dykes while walking the busy streets of London. Several days later, he recorded in his diary: "Began writing out a tune for *Lead Kindly Light*." The words were written while Newman was becalmed at sea in the Mediterranean for a week. So, words written on the calm sea and music inspired on the busy streets of London combined to make an immortal hymn.

When Newman was once asked if he was not thankful to have written a hymn so treasured by English-speaking people everywhere, he replied: "Yes, deeply thankful, and more than thankful." Then, after a pause, "But you see it is not the hymn, but the *tune*, that has gained the popularity! The Tune is Dykes', and Dr. Dykes was a great master."

Surely, no music more perfectly

matches the words with which it is sung than *Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee*. The emphasis in the music corresponds perfectly with the emphasis in the hymn. Surely, here is "an exquisite example" of inspired words wedded to an inspired tune. Dykes's personal practice was: "A hymn should be in the first place suggested, or inspired from above, and then carefully perfected."

In all, John B. Dykes composed about three hundred hymn-tunes. On one occasion, he apologized for submitting so many. His apology and explanation, written to Professor Monk, are most interesting: "You and Dr. Stainer and Sir Henry (Smart) laughed at me the other day for *apologizing* for setting so many hymns. And I really feel it still to need, if not an apology, at least an *explanation*. My explanation is simply this: I never think of setting a hymn that *is* worthily set, where the tune can be got. That would be mere silly caprice, or vanity, or presumption. But if a hymn does *not* appear to me worthily set, then, I own, I am often induced, I may say, sometimes almost *compelled*, to try to do my best for it."

Dykes was most generous regarding the use of his tunes. He granted permission freely to most publishers. However, his biographer notes: "He did not give leave to the Unitarians to use his tunes, but only to those who worship Christ as God."

On January 22, 1876, before reaching his 53rd birthday, John B. Dykes experienced the truth he helped spread through song:

*But sweeter far thy face to see,
And in thy presence rest.*

David Breed, in his book *The History and Use of Hymns*, says of Dykes: "We have in his productions the union of the best in hymnody with the best in music." Surely, Christendom owes John B. Dykes a debt of gratitude for his standard of excellence in tunes which has up-graded the caliber of our tunes and for his own personal contributions of inspired compositions.