

“Joy To The World”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

OUR CHRISTMAS SERVICES would hardly seem complete without the singing of *Joy to the World*, the most joyous of the carols. Yet Isaac Watts, its author, never intended it to be a Christmas carol at all. Rather, it was a part of his *Psalms of David Imitated*, published in 1719, which contained paraphrases of many of the Psalms in New Testament language.

The story of the hymn, *Joy to the World*, is the story of the author, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), who is universally acknowledged as “The Father of English Hymnody”. He has earned the title, not because he was first to write English hymns, but because he gave impetus to hymnody and established its place in the worship of the English church.

For over one hundred years, congregational singing had been strictly limited to the Psalms of the Old Testament in poetic form. Many of these rhymed Psalms were so unnatural that Samuel Wesley, father of the famous brothers Charles and John, called them “scandalous doggerel,” and his opinion was shared by many.

The birth of Isaac Watts to a dissenting deacon and the daughter of a Huguenot refugee was followed by fourteen years of persecution and hardships for the entire family. Perhaps this suffering was responsible for Isaac Watts’ ill health, for he grew only to a height of just over five feet and was weak and sickly all his life.

Though weak in body, the boy



Isaac Watts

was strong in mind and spirit and early in life showed promise of poetic capability. After one Sunday morning service, Isaac, then fifteen years old, complained of the atrocious worship in song. One of the deacons challenged him: “Give us something better, young man.” His answer was ready for the evening service and was sung that night in the Independents’ meeting, Southampton, where his father was pastor. Perhaps a hint of things to come was contained in this first verse of Isaac Watts:

*Behold the glories of the Lamb
Amidst His Father’s throne;
Prepare new honors for His name,
And songs before unknown.*

When Isaac began to preach several years later, his congregation sang the songs that seemed to flow from his pen like a river.

In 1707, the accumulation of eighteen years was published under the title, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. The river continued to flow, and in 1719 his “*Psalms of David Imitated*” was published, not as a new paraphrase of David, but as an imitation of him in New Testament language. It was as though the Psalms burst forth in their fulfillment at last.

Joy to the World is the “imitation” of the last half of Psalm 98. The author transformed the old Jewish psalm of praise for some historic deliverance into a Christian song of rejoicing for the salvation of God that began to be manifested when the Babe of Bethlehem came “to make his blessing flow far as the curse is found.” This is one of the most joyous hymns in all Christendom because it makes so real what Christ’s birth means to all mankind.

The tune to which the hymn is sung is attributed to George Frederick Handel and bears resemblance to phrases of his great oratorio, *Messiah*. Notably the first four tones match the beginning of the chorus, “Lift Up Your Heads.”

As we rejoice in the coming to earth of our Saviour, we may also be glad for the veritable river of hymns that flowed from the pen of Isaac Watts: for his name stands at the head of our most majestic hymns, notably, “When I Survey The Wondrous Cross,” and in many hymnals more hymns of Isaac Watts are to be found than of any other single author.