

"Christians, Awake! Salute the Happy Morn"

By ROBERT D. KALIS

"WHAT WOULD YOU like for Christmas this year?" asked John Byrom of his nineteen-year-old daughter, Dolly. Her request was for a poem just for herself from her somewhat illustrious father. So it was that on Christmas morning, 1749, Dorothy Byrom, for such was her proper name, found an envelope among her presents inscribed, *Christmas Day for Dolly*. Inside was the poem of forty-eight lines from which we have the Christmas hymn, *Christians, Awake! Salute the Happy Morn*. The original manuscript is still in existence, preserved in the archives of Cheetham's Hospital, Manchester, England.

This Christmas hymn deserves much greater recognition than it presently enjoys. The gospel message in its words goes beyond merely repeating the Christmas story, for it speaks of "God's wondrous love in saving lost mankind," and calls upon us to follow the Babe, "From His poor manger to His bitter cross."

The composer of the hymn-tune, John Wainwright (1723-1768), caught the spirit of the hymn and composed a melody which fits the words perfectly. Though the poem was written just for "Dolly," she apparently was willing to share it, for within one year it had been published and the tune composed. Exactly one year after its birth, John Byrom recorded in his journal: *Christmas 1750: The singing men and boys with Mr. Wainwright came here and sang "Christians, Awake!"*

Byrom was born on leap-year day, February 29, 1692, and so began his unusual life with an unusual birth date. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge, and was awarded a Master's Degree in 1715. Although a fellowship was awarded him at Cambridge University, he resigned and went to study medicine in France where he remained for only one year.

Back in England, he forsook the pursuit of medicine and developed one of the earliest systems of shorthand. Classes were begun after Parliament had given Byrom exclusive rights to teach his shorthand for twenty-one years. Among his students were John and Charles Wesley. So efficient were these pupils that they soon could outstrip their teacher. Some of John Wesley's private papers were written in Byrom's shorthand. When Charles served as secretary to the governor of Georgia, his records were kept in Byrom's shorthand. Many of Charles Wesley's hymns, written in many odd places and under various circumstances, were also written in Byrom's shorthand. Although Byrom was not attracted by the awful seriousness of

early Methodism, he remained the loyal friend and admirer of John and Charles Wesley to the end.

John Byrom was also acquainted with George Whitefield and at least heard Count von Zinzendorf preach in London. The most valuable of all Byrom's associations, however, was his friendship with the great English mystic, William Law. "It is from Byrom's private journal that we derive our best information about Law." It has been suggested that Byrom might have done for Law what Boswell did for Johnson had he chosen to incorporate his notes into a biography of Law instead of leaving them as miscellaneous and sundry entries in his private journal.

Living in an era of many violent controversies, Byrom was adept at remaining above them. When the Stuarts in the person of the "Pretender" attempted to regain the throne, he satirized the situation with four lines that became very popular:

*God bless the King — I mean the Faith's defender;
God bless — no harm in blessing — the Pretender;
But who Pretender is, and who is King —
God bless us all — that's quite another thing.*

Byrom always seemed able to make ridiculous the heated debates of the great of the world. When the musical public argued as to the preeminence of Handel or Bononcini, Byrom wrote:

*Some say, compared to Bononcini
That Mynheer Handel's but a ninny;
Others aver, that he to Handel
Is scarcely fit to hold a candle.
Strange all this difference should be
'Twi' Tweedledum and Tweedledee!*

John Byrom stood aloof from all these controversies and quietly pursued his own interest. When he died on September 26, 1763, at the age of 72 he had lived a full life. He deserves recognition as the astute observer of and commentator on some of the leading religious leaders of his day especially William Law, and as one of the earliest developers of shorthand.

His "literary remains" fill nine volumes, five of which are his poems. It is interesting to note that after his famous shorthand pupil, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had read his poems, he recorded in his journal (July 12, 1773): "He has all the wit and humor of Dr. Swift [Author of *Gulliver's Travels*, etc.] together with much more learning, a deep and strong understanding, and, above all, a serious vein of piety. . . we have some of the finest sentiments that ever appeared in the English tongue: some of the noblest truths expressed with the utmost energy of language, and the strongest colours of poetry."

Of all his works, however, only John Byrom's excellent hymn, "*Christians Awake!*" has survived to "advance the cause of God and of true religion," as Wesley had hoped. It deserves a place with Charles Wesley's *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* and Isaac Watt's *Joy to the World*, and for this hymn alone, if for no other reason, John Byrom is worthy of fame.