

“From Greenland’s Icy Mountains”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

CAN YOU WRITE US an appropriate hymn for tomorrow morning’s service, Reginald?” asked Dean Shipley of his son-in-law and fellow minister, Reginald Heber (1783-1826). Several friends had gathered in the pastor’s study at Wrexham, England, on the day before Pentecost in 1819. The next day was to be a notable day. Not only was it the Day of Pentecost, or Whitsunday as the English call it, but a royal letter from King George III was to be read authorizing an offering to be taken to aid in the propagation of the gospel to the heathen.” Also a new series of meetings was to begin in the evening at which young Reginald Heber was to be the first speaker. It was this speaking engagement which had brought him from his own church at Hodnet, England.

Following his father-in-law’s request Heber withdrew to another part of the room. While the other men continued to visit, he began his poem. Poetry was nothing new to him. At Brasenose College, Oxford, his poems had won first prize on at least two different occasions. During the years of his pastorate at Hodnet he had written a good many hymns. Yet, some-

how, this hymn was different. The words came so speedily.

After about fifteen minutes Dean Shipley asked, “Well, Reginald, what do you have for us?” Heber responded by reading the three stanzas he had already completed. “There, there, that will do very well,” said the dean.

“No, no” replied Heber, “the sense is not complete.” Accordingly, the fourth stanza was added. The entire composition was the work of twenty minutes. Only one word was later changed, *heathen* being substituted for *savage* in the second stanza.

The next morning, May 20, 1819, the Day of Pentecost, the royal letter was read, the offering gathered, the sermon on missions preached, but most

noteworthy of all a great new missionary hymn was introduced to the church. For one hundred and fifty years this trumpet call to missionary service has sounded forth inspiring many to give not only an offering but themselves.

The hymns of Reginald Heber are noteworthy for their superb poetic quality and also for the new meter in which they were written. Until this time, the long meter or the short meter of the Psalter were the only alternatives in English hymnody. Heber opened the door to a greater freedom in the composition of hymns of the church. Many of the fifty-seven hymns which Heber wrote are still in use in the Church of England. Three are well known in modern evangelical circles. The two others besides our subject are: *Holy Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty* and *The Son of God Goes Forth to War*. It has been said of the former of these that more Christians have learned the doctrine of the Trinity from this hymn of unsurpassed majesty than from all the sermons ever preached on the subject. The latter hymn has been and still is a favorite with Christian boys especially.



Reginald Heber

(Continued on page 12)

"From Greenland's Icy Mountains"
(continued from page 9)

The story of the hymn tune called *Missionary Hymn* to which *From Greenland's Icy Mountains* is always sung is almost as interesting as that of the hymn itself. Somehow, a copy of the hymn crossed the Atlantic and came into the possession of a Christian lady in Savannah, Georgia. Deeply stirred by the words, she desired to sing it as a solo. Since the meter was unusual she could not find a tune to fit the words. She had heard that a young clerk in the bank just a few

doors away was very talented in writing music. Her son was sent with a copy of the words, and in just half an hour he returned with the music known everywhere today as *Missionary Hymn*.

The young bank clerk was Lowell Mason who went on to become the "Father of church music in America." Reginald Heber also went on. Heeding the call of his own hymn he went as a missionary to India in 1823. For three years he served as Bishop of Calcutta. To Reginald Heber belongs the distinction of ordaining the first Hindu to the ministry. Shortly before his forty-third birthday, after only three years in India, Reginald Heber was called to his heavenly home, but his hymn still calls Christians to respond to the great commission of the Lord Jesus Christ, "*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.*"