

THE STORY OF THE ENGLISH HYMNAL

by Dr. J.B. Willis

Talk to the Institute of Spiritual Studies, St Peter's Eastern Hill, 21 July 2009
(read by Peter Yewers).

(A shortened version of this talk was given during Evensong in Christ Church South Yarra on 21 Feb. 2010, read by Rodney Wetherell.)

Let's begin by seeing how many people know and use, or have used, *The English Hymnal*. How many people attend a church where it is currently used? How many have used it in the past? [Show of hands].

My own experience of *The English Hymnal* began at the age of eleven when I was in the choir at an English boarding school in the mid-1930s. Even that young age I had the feeling that it was a better hymn book, particularly with regard to tunes, than *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, which is what I had been accustomed to in my parish church. When I came to my present parish church, St James the Great, East St Kilda, some thirty years ago I was delighted to find that it used *The English Hymnal*, though more recently we have gone over to the Australian hymnbook, *Together in Song*.

Another much more distinguished churchman than myself wrote recently:

I first handled the unmistakable squat green book on my first visit to an Anglican church at the age of eleven. When – a matter of weeks later - I joined the choir, it became more and more familiar: and when fourteen years later I landed up in the college at Mirfield, I was delighted to find the same solid little volume, complete and unexpurgated, in front of me, and I knew I was going to be at home musically and liturgically.

These words come from Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Historical background

It is now just over 100 years since *The English Hymnal* was first published - it appeared on Ascension Day 1906. Before talking about the book and its publication, let's try to imagine what it was like to be living in England and worshipping in the Church of England at that time. The year 1906 was in the middle of the Edwardian era - that brief interlude between the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 and the death of her son Edward VII in 1910. We tend to think of the Edwardian era as a happy, sunny afternoon that was only shattered by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. But it was also a period of change, and often controversial change, in both Church and State.

In the political sphere, 1906 saw a General Election in which, for the first time for many years, the Liberal Party won a sweeping victory. The new government began to put in place a number of long-overdue social reforms, such as the introduction of Old Age Pensions. Plans were drawn up for the introduction of Home Rule for Ireland, but these had to be put on hold when war broke out in 1914 and were never implemented. The Parliamentary Labour Party came into existence at this time, but there was much industrial unrest and bitterness. In 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst had founded the Women's Social and Political Union, and together with her daughters Christobel and Sylvia was conducting a militant and controversial campaign to obtain votes for women. The year 1906 also saw the launch of the battleship *HMS Dreadnought*, which was symbolic of the beginning of the armaments race between Britain and Germany.

In the Church, Randall Davidson had become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1902 and remained as Primate until 1928. The Church of England was still very much the Established Church, and Parliament and the Government still intervened in its affairs. Within living memory Anglican priests had been sent to prison for introducing Roman Catholic practices into their liturgy and ceremonial, and the battles between Low Churchmen, represented by the Church Association, and Anglo-Catholics, represented by the Church Union, were far from over.

An indication of the rigidity of the attitudes of many on what was and was not permissible in Anglican worship can be seen from the report in 1906 of a Royal Commission on Clerical Discipline. It was acknowledged that hymns had no precise legal status in worship, but were now widely accepted. However a leading Evangelical, Dr E.A. Knox, Bishop of Manchester, said, without demur from any member of the Commission:

The general use of hymns in all services, and at all sorts of unforeseen points in the course of the service, is another instance of an irregularity which has found popular acceptance, but for which, so far as I am aware, no legal authority could be advanced . . . Much more false doctrine finds its way into people's minds through hymns than through sermons or other practices.

An interesting sidelight on Bishop Knox is that his son, Ronald Knox, became a Roman Catholic, was ordained a priest, and eventually became a Monsignor. His great achievement was to undertake, single-handed, a new translation of both the Old and New Testaments from the Latin of the Vulgate into 'timeless English'. These translations were published in the 1940s.

An important outcome of the Commission was the recognition that:

The law of public worship is too narrow for the religious life of the present generation. It needlessly condemns much which a great section of church people, including many of her most devoted members, value; and modern thought and feeling are characterized by a care for ceremonial, a sense of dignity in worship, and an appreciation of the continuity of the Church, which were not similarly felt when the law took its present shape.

The Commission's most important recommendation concerned revision of the Prayer Book, which after a long, slow and cumbrous procedure finally led to the presentation of the 1928 Book to Parliament, where it was twice rejected by the House of Commons.

So all was not sweetness and light in the Established Church, and one of Davidson's chief aims in his long Primacy was to maintain the comprehensiveness of the Church.

On the theological side, the results of 19th century German biblical criticism, with its attack on the historical accuracy of the Gospels, were beginning to cross the English Channel - 1906 saw the publication of a famous and controversial book by Albert Schweitzer which was translated into English under the title *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. The professional training of many English clergy at the time was a somewhat hit-and-miss affair. Theological colleges had only recently come into existence, and half the clergy in the early 1900s had entered their profession in the time-honoured way, by taking a degree at Oxford or Cambridge and hopefully reading some theology at University before completing their training by serving as a curate under an experienced parish priest.

The Edwardian era also saw the rapid growth of secular humanism, and writers such as George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells were at the height of their influence. My father, who was a teenager (though the word had not yet been invented) in the Edwardian era, was a great admirer of these writers.

This gives you some background on the England into which *The English Hymnal* was launched.

Hymn singing in the early twentieth century

The Book of Common Prayer makes no mention of hymns, the only exception being 'Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire', which is sung or said at the ordination of a priest and the consecration of a bishop.

From the time of the Reformation until the 1860s congregational singing in the Anglican Church had consisted mostly of metrical psalms. These were accepted because they were the words of Scripture. However, the Methodists, when they broke away from the Anglican Church in the eighteenth century, had taken up hymn singing in a big way, with Charles Wesley alone writing thousands of hymns, and in this regard they were the envy of many Anglicans, particularly the Evangelicals.

At first the Tractarians regarded hymns with great suspicion, as they were reminiscent of Protestant Nonconformity. However, this view changed when J.M. Neale in 1851 produced a collection of translations of Latin hymns, together with their plainsong music. Then in 1861 *Hymns Ancient and Modern* appeared. Initially it was regarded with some suspicion, as being too high church, but it rapidly became a national institution. It was clear that any attempt to introduce an alternative book was going to be difficult and would require a completely new approach. It so happened that a new edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* appeared in 1904 but received a very poor reception, probably because some of the old favourites had either appeared in reformed versions or had vanished altogether. Furthermore, the committee overseeing the new edition comprised mainly musicians, and there was no real poet among them. So the little group contemplating the production of *The English Hymnal* were encouraged to proceed with their project.

Who was brought up, like I was, on *Hymns A and M*? [show of hands]

Percy Dearmer and the conception of *The English Hymnal*

Now we come to the compilation of *The English Hymnal*. The idea of having a new hymnbook was the brainchild of the Revd Percy Dearmer [show picture]. He was born in 1867, the son of an artist, and was artistic himself. He was greatly influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement, which was founded in the late 19th century by a group of British artists and social reformers inspired by John Ruskin and William Morris. They sought to stem the tide of Victorian mass production, and to restore the role of art and craftsmanship. In 1899 Dearmer wrote *The Parson's Handbook* [show copy], which set forth his ideas on the decoration, furnishings and ornaments of the Anglican Church and on the conduct of its services. If you wanted to know the correct length of a surplice, how to assemble a procession, or what flowers were suitable for growing in a churchyard, you would find the answer in *The Parson's Handbook*. Dearmer was Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Primrose Hill, Hampstead in northwest London from 1901 to 1915, and it was there that he began to put his ideas into practice.

Dearmer was an Anglo-Catholic, but unlike many of his contemporaries of that persuasion he was strongly opposed to the adoption of 19th-century Roman practices, and looked for inspiration to English usages from the pre-Reformation period, though he was a stickler for following the rubrics in *The Book of Common Prayer*. He had broad sympathies, and said in the preface to a little book he published in 1912 called *Everyman's History of the Book of Common Prayer* [show copy of download]:

This little book cannot be claimed to be either 'high-church' or 'low-church.' It is written in the belief that both those party terms are becoming obsolete, and that the Churchman of the future will be content to be a faithful Christian, and an honest man, thinking highly of the Church and lowly of himself.

Sadly, a hundred years later, his prediction has not yet come to pass!

Politically, Dearmer was what would now be described as left-wing - while reading Modern History at Oxford, he became one of the first members of the Christian Social Union, which advocated socialism, and was active in helping the wharf labourers in the London dock strike of 1889. He was ordained priest in 1892 and the same year married Mabel White, an artist who wrote and illustrated children's books and was an early feminist, active in the Votes for Women movement. Apparently Dearmer himself was also a feminist and an early advocate of women's ordination. During the First World War he served as chaplain to a Red Cross ambulance unit in Serbia, where Mabel died of typhoid fever in 1915. After the war he devoted himself to writing and to social work and also served as Professor of Ecclesiastical Art at King's College, London until his death in 1936.

In 1904, while Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, he felt that the words and music of many of the hymns in books such as *Hymns Ancient and Modern* were weak and sentimental, and that the Church deserved something better – more manly and cheerful hymns, as he put it. He was outspoken in his criticism of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, saying:

It had all the defects of its age. It was an age with which we have very little in common; the religious world was interested in its own salvation, but was much less interested in God, and not at all in its neighbour – except when he lived a very long way off . . . There are many hymns about the life of Christ, but even at Christmas none of them dwell upon the fact that Christianity involves peace and goodwill upon earth. There are a few hymns about the Holy Spirit, and one or two rather mechanical or mathematical ones about the Trinity, but almost none about the eternal Father.

The Musical Editor – Ralph Vaughan Williams

Dearmer gathered together a small committee of like-minded clergy and laymen and set about compiling a new hymnbook. Using his wide connections in the world of art and literature he looked for a musical editor, but instead of approaching well-known church musicians he asked his friend Cecil Sharp to suggest a suitable person. Sharp is chiefly famous for his work during the late 19th century in the collection, publication and performance of English folk song and folk dance before they disappeared from the English countryside. Sharp introduced Dearmer to a young musician, almost unknown at that time, called Ralph Vaughan Williams [show picture]. Williams wrote later:

It must have been in 1904 that I was sitting in my study in Barton Street, Westminster, when a cab drove up to the door and ‘Mr Dearmer’ was announced. I just knew his name vaguely as a parson who invited tramps [swagmen] to sleep in his drawing room; but he had not come to me about tramps. He went straight to the point and asked me to edit the music of a hymn book. I protested that I knew very little about hymns but he explained to me that Cecil Sharp had suggested my name, and I found out afterwards that Canon Scott Holland had also suggested me as a possible editor, and the final clinch was given when I understood that if I did not do the job it would be offered to a well-known church musician with whose musical ideas I was much out of sympathy.

So after thinking it over for twenty-four hours Williams decided to accept. Dearmer told him that the work would take about two months and that each of the founders of the new hymn book would put down £5 for out-of-pocket expenses. Williams found in fact that the work occupied two years and that his bill for clerical expenses alone came to £250.

Vaughan Williams was born in 1872 in a Gloucestershire village, where his father was the incumbent, though the father died when Ralph was two years old and the family moved away from there. He studied music at Cambridge and at the Royal College of Music in London and then studied composition briefly with Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris. He had short spells as organist at two London churches, but was never a professing Christian - his wife later described him as having 'drifted into a cheerful agnosticism'. He was deeply influenced by folk-song, which permeated all his work and showed itself strongly in *The English Hymnal*. He went on to become one of the leading English composers of the first half of the twentieth century. Vaughan Williams lived to a ripe old age and died in 1958. I saw him once, in 1947 when I was working in London. He was in the audience at a concert at which one of his orchestral works (*Job – A Masque for Dancing*) was played, and he was brought on to the stage to receive the applause of the audience. All I can remember about the occasion was that he was a tall elderly man with a shock of white hair.

Thus *The English Hymnal* came into being as a result of collaboration between two very unusual - and very different - men: Percy Dearmer and Ralph Vaughan Williams, assisted by a small committee of clergy and laymen. They tried to get Robert Bridges, a future Poet Laureate, to join the committee, but he declined. In the 1890s Bridges had published a small collection of hymns called *The Yattendon Hymnal*, Yattendon being the village in Berkshire where he trained the church choir. He shared many of the ideals of the editors of *The English Hymnal*. In the event, about a dozen hymns from *The Yattendon Hymnal* were incorporated into *The English Hymnal*.

The *English Hymnal* committee began meeting in 1904 and continued over a period of about two years. It arranged for the Oxford University Press, which had published *The Parson's Handbook*, to publish both the words and music of the new hymnbook. This was something new for this Press, which had never printed music before.

It is worth reading an extract from the Preface to the 1906 book: [read]

The English Hymnal is a collection of the best hymns in the English language, and is offered as a humble companion to the Book of Common Prayer for use in the Church. It is not a party-book, expressing this or that phase of negation or excess, but an attempt to combine in one volume the worthiest expressions of all that lies within the Christian Creed We therefore offer the book to all broad-minded men, in the hope that every one will find within these pages the hymns which he rightly wants ...

In choosing the hymns the editors did a number of things that had not been done in earlier hymn books:

- (1) Hymns were printed wherever possible as their authors wrote them.
- (2) Adequate provision was made for hymns not only for Sundays, but also for all those other Holy-days which are ordered in the Prayer Book to be observed in the same way as Sundays.
- (3) A number of Office Hymns were introduced. These were taken from the monastic offices and translated from Latin into English.

With regard to the music, Vaughan Williams expressed his beliefs strongly:

- (1) He regarded hymns as being for a mixed congregation rather than for the choir alone. For that reason he pitched many of them lower than in previous hymnals. My wife, who had a high soprano voice, used to complain that they were impossibly low for her, to which I could only reply that she should sing them an octave higher than they were written!
- (2) He claimed that the practice at that time in England was to sing hymns much too fast, so he gave metronome marks. These were claimed to be suitable for a large church with a congregation of average size. It's interesting to note that in the eighteenth century John Wesley complained that the English sang hymns far too slowly!
- (3) Expression marks, i.e. indications of loudness and softness, were omitted, as he felt that subtleties of expression were unsuitable in congregational singing.
- (4) It is in the choice of tunes that Vaughan Williams's beliefs come out most strongly. He felt that many of the popular hymns at the time were usually sung to Victorian tunes that were enervating and sentimental and were 'poor' music. He felt he couldn't get rid of all of these 'old favourites', so he relegated some of them to an Appendix, which he referred to as his 'chamber of horrors'. He said:

It ought no longer to be true anywhere that the most exalted moments of a churchgoer's week are associated with music that would not be tolerated in any place of secular entertainment.

He claimed that congregations would like 'good' tunes if they were offered them.

In collecting new tunes he drew heavily on English and other folk songs, on French provincial church music, and on Lutheran chorales. He also composed a number of tunes himself, and these are to my mind some of the finest hymn tunes in existence. Examples are *Sine Nomine*, composed for Hymn 641 ('For all the Saints who from their labours rest'), *Salve Festa Dies*, for Hymns 628, 630, and 634 ('Hail thee festival day, blest day that art hallowed for ever', and *Down Ampney* (named after the village of his birth), for Hymn 152 ('Come down O love divine').

[We shall have the opportunity of hearing recordings of two of these hymns, sung by the Tudor Choristers and the audience, at a concert given at Our Lady of Victories Church, Camberwell, in June 2008 to mark the 50th anniversary of the death of Vaughan Williams.]

The launch of *The English Hymnal*

The Editorial Committee met twice a week, and after two years of work - a remarkably short time for such an enterprise - it had completed its work, and on Ascension Day 1906 *The English Hymnal* appeared in print. It was an immediate success, and in the first four months 129,000 copies were sold. But trouble was on the horizon. A year before publication the Oxford University Press had expressed to Dearmer its concern that some of the bishops might prohibit the use of the book in their dioceses. The hymns that were likely to cause offence were about half a dozen in number, and had to do with invocation of the Saints. The University Press reminded Dearmer that in the Report of the Royal Commission the Bishops were recommended to use much more care in dealing with hymns and anthems than they did. But Dearmer and his Committee refused to make any changes, so the English Hymnal was published as it stood.

The balloon went up first in the diocese of Bristol, whose bishop, George Browne, was known to be somewhat pedantic when interpreting rubrics and canons. He was anxious to eliminate false and heretical doctrines, and saw in *The English Hymnal* 'a direct attempt to introduce into the services of the Church of England, under cover of hymns, requests addressed to the Saints on our behalf'.

A hymn he particularly objected to was No. 218, beginning 'Ye who own the faith of Jesus', which is in honour of the Virgin Mary, and includes the words

For the sick and for the aged,
For our dear ones far away,
For the hearts that mourn in secret,
All who need our prayers today,
For the faithful gone before us,
May the holy Virgin pray.

Dearmer, in a newspaper interview, asked

Does the Bishop think we should sing 'May the Holy Virgin not pray?' It is ridiculous. Every Nonconformist and every Churchman believes that all God's saints pray . . . That hymn was written by Mr V S S Coles, Principal of Pusey House, Oxford, one of the most respected and trusted clergymen in the Church of England. I suppose that a hundred years ago the Bishop would have put Mr Coles in prison, or three hundred years ago would have burned him.

Bishop Browne realized that it was useless to prohibit the use of certain parts of the book while allowing the rest of the book to be used in public worship, and felt he had no

alternative but to prohibit entirely the use of *The English Hymnal* in the diocese of Bristol.

Dearmer tended to write off Bishop Browne's action as unimportant - after all, Bristol was a small diocese, only recently split off from the Diocese of Gloucester - and he even suggested that the publicity it engendered might actually be a good thing for sales of the *English Hymnal*, because people would resent Bishop Browne's interference with their liberties. But when the Archbishop of Canterbury announced that after careful examination of the book he felt bound to express the hope that it would not be used in his diocese, things became much more serious. Then several more bishops, including Winchester, Exeter, Bristol and Oxford, refused to allow the book to be used in their dioceses, while others expressed the wish that the objectionable hymns could be removed from the book.

The Oxford University Press was very worried about the situation, believing no doubt that its reputation was at stake and that it might even be involved in a heresy trial. Moreover, sales of the book were falling, and some booksellers had returned copies, probably because they were frightened of legal action. The Oxford University Press suggested publishing an expurgated edition, with a few hymns removed or altered. Dearmer and his committee were adamantly against this idea, saying that, unlike the Roman Church, the Anglican Church had never had an index of 'forbidden' books. The Chairman of the Editorial Committee even drafted an open letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, challenging him to tell them where in the book heretical doctrines were to be found. However, the Committee was finally persuaded by the Oxford Press to agree to the publication of an expurgated edition, though the Committee insisted that the original version must still be kept on the market.

The production of the expurgated edition - euphemistically called 'the abridged edition' - was a typographical triumph. There was no alteration in the numbering of the hymns, nor were there any blank pages. The Bishop of London said he hoped the original edition would be taken off the market, but Dearmer's committee refused to sanction this. So the two editions were offered for sale, but the abridged version was never popular - in fact there are virtually no copies of it still in existence.

If you want to know about the omissions and changes made in the abridged edition, they can be summarized thus:

Hymns omitted were:

No. 185: 'Blest martyrs, let thy triumph-day God's favouring grace to us convey ...'

No. 195: 'Another year completed, The day comes round once more .' (for a Patronal Festival)

No.208: 'All prophets hail thee, from of old announcing . . .' (for the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

No. 213 'Hail, O star that pointest .. .' (for the Annunciation)

No. 350: 'Christ enthroned in highest heaven ... ' (for the departed)
Small changes were made in four other hymns.

I must admit that most of these hymns are unknown to me, except for No. 213: 'Hail O Star that pointest towards the port of Heaven', which we still sing on occasion at St James's. This is a 9th-century Latin hymn for the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, translated into English by Athelstan Riley, who was one of the Editorial Committee. I think the lines found objectionable were probably verses 4 and 5:

Jesu's tender Mother
Make thy supplication
Unto him who chose thee
At his Incarnation;
That, O matchless Maiden,
Passing meek and lowly,
Thy dear Son may make us
Blameless, chaste and holy.

The English Hymnal took off and sold well for the next eighty years. By the time of its 50th anniversary, in 1956, it had sold nearly five million copies.

A question that puzzles me is this: in view of the opposition from the bishops, how did *The English Hymnal* become so successful? Did the bishops withdraw their objections, did the clergy and people just ignore them, or what? The minutes of the meetings of the Editorial Committee were not preserved, so perhaps we shall never know.

The English Hymnal had considerable influence for many years on the compilation of new hymnals. In the 1920s Percy Dearmer and Vaughan Williams, with the assistance of another English composer, Martin Shaw, went on to produce two other very successful books: *Songs of Praise*, which was particularly intended for use in schools and was adopted by the BBC in its religious broadcasts, and *The Oxford Book of Carols* [show]. In 1950 the Episcopal Church of Scotland decided to authorize *A Hymnal for Scotland*, and did this by adopting *The English Hymnal* in its entirety, together with fourteen additional hymns. Many of the hymns, both words and music, have a distinctly Celtic flavour, deriving from Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and include hymns commemorating Celtic saints.

The 1960s onwards saw the growth and spread of the Parish Communion, and in 1962 the Oxford University Press published *The English Hymnal Service Book*. This contained about half of the hymns in the original *English Hymnal* together with some extra hymns and all the music that both choir and congregation would need for the Prayer Book services of Mattins, Holy Communion and Evensong. New features included the Versicles and Responses from Mattins and Evensong, a pointed Psalter, and the Merbecke setting of the Holy Communion.

Apart from a new music edition in 1933, which contained additional tunes, *The English Hymnal* of 1906 remained virtually unchanged until 1986, when it was replaced with *The New English Hymnal* [show]. Since the average life of a hymnal is normally reckoned at about 25 years, this is no mean achievement. But its old rival, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, outdid *The English Hymnal* in this respect: in the first 90 years of its existence, from 1861 to 1951, it sold 100 million copies!

Strengthen for Service

The idea of giving this talk arose when I found that a special book had been produced to celebrate the centenary of publication of *The English Hymnal*. [show]. It is entitled *Strengthen for Service*, which you may recognize as the first line of the post-communion hymn, No. 329: 'Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands that holy things have taken'. The words of this hymn were translated by C.W. Humphreys and Percy Dearmer from the Syriac of the liturgy of Malabar, on the southwest coast of India.

The book consists of a set of essays on various aspects of *The English Hymnal*, and on hymnody in general. One of the chapters I found most interesting is called 'The View from Primrose Hill'. It was written by the Revd Robert Atwell, the present Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Primrose Hill, where a hundred years ago Percy Dearmer was the Vicar. It describes how Dearmer's ideas on worship have been adapted to the realities of the early 21st century. Sadly, the weekly Friday evening congregational hymn practice, at which Dearmer tried out new hymns and tunes before incorporating them in *The English Hymnal*, is no longer practicable! One hundred years ago, *The English Hymnal* related to a culture that was English and Christian, though not necessarily Anglican, and was still familiar with hymns and valued them. The congregation of St Mary's is now multi-national, and at a recent Pentecost service members were asked to say the Lord's Prayer in their mother tongue. Twenty-two different languages emerged, ranging from Icelandic to Lithuanian. As Atwell says, 'it is both exhilarating and challenging to minister in such contexts'. He concludes his essay by saying: 'Dearmer, Vaughan Williams and their fellow editors faced the challenge of their new century with enthusiasm, and we need to find the same energy and vision to do the same for ours'.