

THE THIRD HYMN: A CENTENARY

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MANY events happened in 1847, most of them unimportant. Longfellow was given the story of Evangeline by Hawthorne, urged to immortalize it in verse; Henry Francis Lyte composed "Abide With Me Fast Falls The Eventide," and passed away the end of the year, Nov. 20th. Most readers will judge for themselves the relative importance of the two events.

In November 1947 the religious world will observe the centenary of the poet's death, not because of innate saintliness, intellectual gifts, and charm of personality, but because he was the writer of the third great hymn in the English language. There have been four world-beloved hymns: Augustus Toplady's "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me," Charles Wesley's "Jesus Lover Of My Soul," Henry Lyte's "Abide With Me," and Sarah Flower Adam's "Nearer My God To Thee."

It is not the purpose of this article to give a complete account of the life of Henry Lyte, but a few facts are necessary.

He was born in Scotland, at Ednam, Roxburghshire, 1 June 1793, the son of a British Army officer, the second of three boys. His mother, Anna Maria Oliver was of unusual beauty, and Henry resembled her. The early days of the child were unhappy. The father tired of the mother and sought divorce. At the beginning of the nineteenth century they parted, and Lyte never saw his mother again. Captain Lyte promptly rid himself of the two lads he had claimed and left England. However, he made arrangements for them to be educated at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, Ireland.

Henry at once obtained favour with the headmaster, who recognized an outstanding genius and voluntarily paid for the lad's entire education. It was a source of satisfaction to the poet in later years that he was enabled to return to Dr. Burrows (now Dean of Cork) all the latter had bestowed upon him in the way of financial aid. In May 1809, Henry entered Trinity College, Dublin, as a "Sizar," and here for three years in succession he obtained the Chancellor's prize in English verse. He was remarkably handsome, witty, and brilliant; an orator, but most of all an authentic poet.

His first charge after graduation and ordination was a brief curacy at Taghmon, after which he went to County Wex-

ford to live with Mr. Thomas Bell as tutor to his children. Then came the first break in health, obliging him to leave Britain for the milder climate of France. When he recovered, he accepted the curacy at Marazion on the south coast of Cornwall, where he met Annie Maxwell his future wife; after a brief courtship they were married.

Illness came again. The air of Cornwall was too severe for the asthma from which he suffered, and the family removed to "Sway Cottage," Lymington. Here for the next few years they lived in the utmost happiness and contentment. Greater rest and leisure were responsible for much of his best poetical work. *The Spirit of the Psalms* appeared now. It contained several of his hymns, *Pleasant Are Thy Courts Above, God of Mercy, God of Grace, Praise My Soul The King of Heaven, Praise The Lord His Glories Show, There Is a Safe and Secret Place.* In 1846 came the publication also of his, *Poems of Henry Vaughan With A Memoir.* The cultural world owes much to Lyte for this labor of love. Vaughan was almost unknown at the time, and several men of letters paid tribute to Lyte's selective taste. Those who delight in the lovely poem beginning:

My soul there is a Country
Afar beyond the stars,
Where stands a winged sentry
All skilful in the wars.

will indeed be grateful for his endeavours to bring Vaughan more prominently before the English-speaking world.

Better health than he had known hitherto induced the rector to remove his family to Charlton, Devon. Here Canning the Statesman, who was much moved by one of Lyte's sermons, was to influence his destiny. Poet and statesman met and held several long conversations. Canning had fallen beneath the spell of one of the most saintly and winsome personalities it had ever been his lot to meet, but to his regret Lyte refused to visit him in London. Yet through Canning's efforts, Lyte was given the living at Lower Brixham, near Berry Head, Devon. Here it was trusted balmy air would at last be beneficial. Perhaps the poet had the premonition Brixham would be his final "port of call."

With his natural gifts and cultural attainments, he could have received high preferment in the Anglican church, but he was content to walk the lower road, ministering to the humble fisher folk he loved. His inner life, enriched by poetic gifts and

study, gave to his teaching a quality and breadth of understanding, which his people understood and appreciated. Owing to his efforts, every ship leaving Brixham Harbour carried a Bible aboard. He started Sunday Schools wherever his influence extended, enrolled 800 children, and personally helped train almost one hundred teachers.

In 1847 his health broke completely, and the few short months left to him had to be passed on the continent. Early in that year Henry Lyte gave voice, or rather pen, to the wish of years. "Declining Days", one of the most wistful productions in any language, sheds a glory over his "Abide With Me." A knowledge of the first is necessary to a better understanding of the second, so I quote the last three stanzas.

Might verse of mine inspire
One virtuous aim, one high resolve impart;
Light in one dropping soul a hallow'd fire,
Or bind one broken heart,

Death would be sweeter then,
More calm my slumber 'neath the silent sod;
Might I thus live to bless my fellow men
Or glorify my God!

O Thou! whose touch can lend
Life to the dead, Thy quick'ning grace supply,
And grant me, swanlike, my last breath to spend
In song that may not die.

Only Eternity will show the extent to which his prayer has been answered.

There are many stories concerning the writing of "Abide With Me," but historians are inclined to take the "Old Gardener's" version as the most authentic. Charles Potter, the gardener at Berry Head House, gives the details in full. In a few days Lyte was leaving Brixham for the continent, with Italy in mind. On 4 September, he preached his farewell sermon. His people felt, as they listened to him, that they would see his face no more. After supper he strolled into the garden, where in their season, "the most beautiful daffodils in all England" bent their sweet heads in reverence. It was an evening to induce poetry. The serene sky above distant Dartmoor wore purple clouds upon its silver breast. The harbour was like a shimmering sheet of molten gold. The poet made his way to the rocks and sat down by the water's edge. Then from the

Spirit, the stillness, the beauty, the third great hymn of our language sprang into being.

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee;
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Lyte left Brixham on 13th September, intending to winter in Palermo, but became extremely ill before reaching Nice and passed away there on 20 November.

The poet made several corrections in the hymn. "Thickens" was altered to "deepens." "Speak through the gloom," to "Shine through the gloom." The first line of the last verse was intended to read "Hold then Thy cross," but through a printer's error it has always read "Hold Thou Thy cross."

"Abide With Me," will never die while hymns are sung and human hearts seek comfort not of earth. In every war in which English-speaking men have engaged since the hymn appeared, it has given fighting strength and dying grace. Composed in the eventide of a life that had been one long discipline of physical weakness, it wings its way into the heart.

Edith Cavell passed from prison to the Fairer Regions leaning on its strength, and countless others have entered the Hereafter with its words upon their lips.

Henry Lyte's prayer to write a song that would not die, has been gloriously answered.