

HENRY ALLINE'S "HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS"

By MAURICE W. ARMSTRONG

HYMNS and Spiritual Songs by Henry Alline, late Minister of the Gospel at Falmouth in Nova Scotia are no longer sung and seldom remembered in their native Province. Aesthetically this is not a serious loss, although some of Alline's verses, inspired by Fundy's tides or Acadian summers, are not without literary merit. Consider, for example, the following:

Awake thou bell'wing ocean wide,
Rouse all the tenants of your deep:
And let the murmurs of your tide,
Boil up and in His praises leap.

Or take this description of a thunder storm in the Annapolis Valley:

Like angry bulls with rapid force
Spread o'er the hills with muttering voice.

Such lines entitle Alline to a place among what Dr. Mac-Mechan used to call "the headwaters of Canadian literature." Very few, however, of the four hundred and eighty-eight hymns attain this high level. Alline himself had no formal education after coming to Nova Scotia in his twelfth year in 1760. Nor had he time during the crowded years of his public ministry between 1776 and 1783, when he visited the Pre-Loyalist settlements of Nova Scotia on snowshoes or on horseback, to improve his literary style. The amazing thing is that he was able to produce the quantity of writing that he did. His torturous, mystical theology printed by A. Henry in Halifax, and the three hundred and thirty-four page reply which it evoked from the orthodox Jonathan Scott of Chebogue are a chapter of Canadian literature almost entirely neglected by both theologians and historians.¹ Of these early books, none had wider circulation or greater influence than Alline's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.

As early as 1783 the Reverend Jonathan Scott records that he had seen "one little Pamphlet containing twenty-two of his (Alline's) short Hymns."² A copy of this earliest of Canadian hymnals might possibly still be found in some old family library.

(1) Alline's theological works are *Two Mites*, 342 pp, Halifax, 1781; *The Anti-Traditionist*, 70 pp. n.p., n.d.; and three *Sermons* (1782-83). His well known *Journal* was published in Boston, 1806. Scott's *Brief View* was published at Halifax by subscription in 1784.

(2) Scott, *Brief View*, 205.

The only editions of the Hymns discovered so far are those printed at Boston in 1784; at Dover, New Hampshire in 1795 and again in 1797; and at Stonington-Port, Connecticut in 1802. Four editions of any book are noteworthy. The popularity of Alline's work can only mean that the Nova Scotian hymns met and satisfied a wide spread spiritual need of the times. "I have endeavoured," the author says in his Preface, "to be so various in my subjects, to be adapted to almost every capacity, station of life, or frame of mind." Thus, in the *Hymns* the frontiersmen of Nova Scotia and New England found a mirror of their own religious experiences. Looking into that mirror, even after one hundred and seventy years, we may still catch the reflection of "trembling sinners and lively saints" on their "Christian Travels." Such a mirror has value for both the social and the ecclesiastical historian. Among the recurrent patterns the following appear most frequently.

(1) *Against Carnal Mirth*

How vain the wretch that does employ
His mind in quest of carnal joy,
And for one hour of carnal mirth
Chain down his soul to endless death.

* * * *

Ah, could you now one moment know
The horrors of that gulph below,
You would not hug your sensual joys,
Nor sell your soul for empty toys.

This Nova Scotian Puritanism also appears in the records of the dissenting churches. For example at Chebogue one of the members

...manifested much Censoriousness against the Church in general for putting on Things in Dress (the Women especially) and allowing the Children of the Church to dress and adorn themselves. . . , such as Ruffles on their Arms, Ruffs, and Ribands, and Beads worn about their Necks, . . . Pride in Dress, and taking Snuff, were the Things he complained of."³

Frivolity, intemperance, "carnal songs," dancing and "follies of that kind," were but tokens of man's depravity. One whose face was set toward salvation would have more "weaned affections."

(3) *Records of the Church of Jebougue* 166. MSS. in N. S. Archives.

Awake, arise, ye carnal souls,
 No longer waste your breath
 In carnal joys, and sensual bowls,
 So near eternal death.

(2) *The Gaping Grave*

The omnipresence of death forms a somber background to all the Hymns. Human life (without God) is short, bitter and uncertain.

Thus in an instant man is hurl'd
 Through a few hours of pain
 Then drops into an unknown world,
 And ne'er returns again.

As soon, ah! Soon we must pursue
 That soul so lately fled;
 And soon of us they may say too
 Ah! such a one is dead.

Probably because child mortality was high, Aline's "Children's hymns" all emphasize this same lugubrious theme, and the young people of the frontier were taught to sing:

Lord I am young and soon may go
 Down to the silent tomb
 When endless joy or endless woe
 Must be my lasting home.

To these constant reminders of physical death were added the solemn warnings of the certainty of divine judgment.

(3) *Where Endless Horrors Dwell*

Small is the thread, and short the step
 Between your soul and hell;
 And the next breath you may be swept
 Where endless horrors dwell.

O how I shudder on the brink,
 And groan at ev'ry breath;
 My soul each hour exposed to sink
 In everlasting death.

An aged sinner sings,

Yet if I here remain to die,
 And surely sink to hell;
 Therefore, I am resolv'd to try
 While there's a who can tell.

The Hymns are filled with these pathetic cries of despairing souls, "strangers to God," "laden with guilt and born to die."

They feel that they are caught in "the devil's snares," bound with "the chains of death," and "glidding down the slippery slope of hell." From a literary point of view the language is vigorous and picturesque, but if one can realize that these words literally expressed the deepest concern of thousands of people, both for themselves and for their families, one may grasp to some extent the psychology of the way to salvation and the great awakening that followed.

(4) *The Language of Awakened Sinners*

But now my sins begin to rise
 Like guilty mountains to the skies.
 And all I see is death and woe,
 O wither, wither, shall I go?

I pray, I cry, but's all in vain,
 No help nor refuge can I find;
 There's nothing doth remove my pain,
 Nor ease my poor distressed mind.

On such sick souls the emotional impact of Alline's message was tremendous. The love and mercy of God is presented in striking antithesis to the forbidding doctrine of implacable justice.

(5) *The Gospel Call*

Sinners behold the Saviour stands,
 With pardon in his bleeding hands,
 To court you from the jaws of hell,
 That you in perfect bliss may dwell.

I come, saith Jesus, lo, I come
 To help the poor is my delight;
 Love is my nature, love my name,
 My help is free both day and night.

Alline is at his best in these Gospel hymns. The doctrine of free grace is sung with something more than mere evangelical fervor.

Lord, why should sinners go to hell,
 And in eternal darkness dwell,
 When Jesus spilt his precious blood
 To bring the worst of souls to God?

Christ fights the battle, wins the race,
 While we believe and sing free grace.

Pictures of Christ's sufferings, often both vivid and crude in their physical details helped to stir the sinner's heart, and to lead him to identify himself with the Atoner.

What solemn groans are those I hear,
 Its like some bleeding victim near,
 From Golgotha methinks they rise,
 Ah! 'tis the Saviour bleeds for me.
 For me, for me, for me, for me,
 He bows His head and groans and dies.

All dress'd in purple gore he hangs
 In agonies and dying pangs.

With such moving and personal appeals, small wonder that, "Many Christians were so carried away at the meeting, that they could not contain from crying out."⁴ Men spoke of "awakening" and experienced a great emotional release.

(6) *The Day of Espousals*

The climax of the awakening was the crisis of conversion. Nowhere is it more simply or beautifully expressed than in these lines:

I'll go with my load of guilt,
 And fall before his throne;
 Believe his blood for me was spilt,
 And trust in him alone.

In that definite act of the volition the troubled soul found peace.

When I was trembling on the brink
 Of death and long despair,
 Ling'ring and fearing soon to sink,
 Then Jesus did appear.

* * * *

He gave my soul a heavenly peace,
 And gave me strength divine;
 He made my cutting anguish cease,
 And said that he was mine.

Exultingly, the "newborn saint" began to proclaim himself "a miracle of grace," and to exhort others to press on towards conversion, while fellow "Christians" rejoiced and chanted,

Hosanna! let the Christians join,
 A soul is added to our band:
 And welcome soul, the prize is thine,
 To reign with us at Christ's right hand

(7) *Christian Travels*

It would be a mistake to think that conversion was the end of the religious experiences of these people. It was only the be-

(4) H. Alline, *Life and Journal*, 144.

ginning. Henceforth they were pilgrims travelling on toward heaven. The road had its ups and downs, and these vicissitudes of "Christian Travel" were a constant source of conversation and discussion in public and in private. The inward movements of the soul were as real and were talked of as much as a journey to Boston or the adventures of a Liverpool privateer. Alline devotes one whole section of his book to them.

Blest are the souls that know the Lord,
 And humbly walk before his face:
 They feast upon immortal food,
 And sing with joy, redeeming grace.

Such a state of spiritual exaltation did not always last. Like the saints of all ages, these Maritime Christians were often perplexed by periods of "darkness" and the familiar "Night of the Soul."

Sometimes I'm like a wandering Jew,
 That seeks a friend whom once he knew,
 Nor doth my weary footsteps end,
 Until I find my absent friend.

* * * *

Thus vex'd with darkness, doubts and fears,
 In exile's paths I rove:
 God knows I find no pleasure here,
 Yet don't enjoy his love.

Sometimes such "mourning" was accompanied by physical disturbances.

My food's unpleasant to my taste,
 My couch affords my soul no rest.

In happier hours, however, the saint was freed from such depression and enjoyed not only a sense of God's nearness, but was also transported by cheering views of His mercy and love. Such "infinite wonders" and "Christian triumphs," make up the last section of the *Hymns* and were probably written during the year 1783 when Henry Alline lay dying of tuberculosis at Falmouth, yet reported that often his soul was in divine rapture believing that he should "awake in glory."

(8) *The Disentangled Saints*

Mount, my triumphant soul above
 This cold, this gloomy cell,
 Long as I feel immortal love,
 I must say all is well.

* * * *

We drink from heav'n the living wine,
 While wandering here below,
 Converse with God on themes divine,
 Which sinners cannot know.

Such conquest of spirit over matter must have done much to soften the austerities of frontier life. As men soared in spirit "within the veil," they experienced not only "heavenly raptures," but occasionally gathered information of a more personal nature. A rather rare old book, *A Narrative of the Life and Christian Experience of Mrs. Mary Bradley of Saint John, N. B., Written by Herself* (1849), contains several examples of such visions.

"The discoveries I had at that time are out of my power to write. I can compare them to nothing more suitable than the unfolding of volumes of past, present, and future events—religious and political."

On one occasion when she was only fifteen years old, she saw her brother approaching the Judgment Throne. "I saw the bottomless pit open, and the flames of hell coming out of the mouth of it, and knowing that my poor brother must take up his abode there to all eternity, I awoke from sleep in great distress."⁵ At another time, she saw "the Saviour's face suspended over her and smiling at her and her fellow "Christians."

The familiar rationalism of the eighteenth century is entirely absent from such experiences. Like his mentor William Law, Alline taught his followers to meet the attack of the deists by appealing to experience. The children of the frontier "much indulged with great discoveries of divine truths," boldly sang:

Is there a God? and is he mine?
Yes for I feel the truths divine.

Should I attempt to find him out
By philosophic strains,
Still far beyond the reach of thought
Unknown to me he reigns.

* * * *

Cease, cease, ye foes of God to tell,
'No knowledge here of heav'n or hell,'
God's spirit here is freely given,
And saints on earth are sure of heaven.

Sometimes, the saints do not even hesitate to sneer a little at the materialists, and sing—

Well, solid minds your earth pursue,
And court your empty toys:
I bid your empty shades adieu,
And boast of solid joys.

(5) Mary Bradley, *A Narrative*. . .etc., 40. There is a copy of this book in the Public Library, Saint John, N. B.

And when the glorious morn shall rise,
 Your glory sinks to hell,
 I'll mount with joy above the skies,
 And in full glory dwell.

By such apologetics the arguments of the village atheist were simply outflanked. Men sang of experiences which they themselves knew, and as they sang, they beheld the same experiences occurring again in others.

Impartial grace is spread abroad,
 There's none excluded by the Lord:
 And ev'ry soul enjoys the feast,
 But those who will refuse to taste.

Such is the mirror of life presented in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. Why the very existence of Alline's works is almost forgotten is difficult to say. It is partly because they were associated with the Free Baptists and other religious separatists. Thirty-seven of the hymns were included in Elias Smith and Abner Jones, *Hymns, Original and Selected for the Use of Christians* (Boston, 1805). At least one of these—

Amazing sight the Saviour stands
 And knocks at every door,
 Ten thousand blessings in his hands
 For to supply the poor:

was included anonymously in Asahel Nettleton's *Village Hymns* (Hartford, 1824), and from thence was copied, and sometimes attributed to Nettleton himself, in various American hymnals. For many years this lone representative of Alline's work, but without his name, was included, most appropriately, in the hymnal widely used by Baptist congregations in Nova Scotia. Even this has now disappeared, and only antiquarians know of a Canadian poet and hymn writer who sang:

Quick as the solar beams display
 And night's dark veil is thrown aside,
 In hopes to meet a brighter day,
 I rise in themes divine to glide.

I tread the meads, and walk the grove,
 Where songsters chant their lays,
 While I pursue my heavenly love
 And notes of heavenly pleasure raise.

The earth refresh'd with beams that shine
 From this bright sun that gilds the day,
 While I am blest with beams divine
 That take my midnight veil away.