

‘Amazing Grace’

Joan McKillop, former Custodian, The Cowper and Newton Museum

[Of all the many emails and enquiries that come into the museum, by far the most numerous are about ‘Amazing Grace’. ‘How did it come to be written?’, ‘Did Newton write the music?’, etc., etc. Consequently I wrote this piece as a standard answer to all such questions. Most of these enquiries come from the United States but I hope the following explanation will be of interest to everyone.]

The Rev. John Newton wrote the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ for the New Year’s Morning sermon at Olney parish church in 1773. It was based on the sermon’s text, I Chronicles 17:16-17, ‘Faith’s Review and Expectation’, and was first published in Olney Hymns (1779). Newton’s friend and neighbour William Cowper wrote some 67 of the Hymns, the remainder of the total of 348 being written by Newton himself. They were mostly intended to illuminate a particular point or sermon during the weekly Bible meetings which took place in the Great House, Olney. They were chanted at first and perhaps later sung to a popular tune, metre allowing.

‘Amazing Grace’ was no exception. In England it was first sung to the tune ‘Hephzibah’. In New York and the eastern United States another tune, ‘Loving Lambs’, was possibly used some time in the early 1800s, while from the mid- to late nineteenth century about ten further tunes were in evidence. In a new book published in 2002, Steve Turner presents extensive research into the origins of the different melodies used. Between 1779 and 1807 the hymn was published in four other collections in addition to the Olney Hymns, three of them American, an early indication that the hymn resonated more across the Atlantic than in home territory.

In 1937 George Pullen Jackson wrote, ‘The poem is by Newton but the source [of the tune] is unknown to the southern compilers.’ The familiar tune, which we all associate with Newton’s words, was also unknown in Britain. According to Mr Turner’s researches, two similar tunes were published in *Columbian Harmony* (Cincinnati, 1829). One was called ‘Gallaher’, used for a Wesleyan hymn; the other, ‘St Mary’s’, for one by Isaac Watts. Then in 1830 the tune, now called ‘Harmony Grove’, was published in *Virginia Harmony* to the words of ‘There is a Land of Pure Delight’, another Isaac Watts hymn. The tune was published again in *The Lexington Cabinet* (1831), and in *The Christian’s Harp and Genuine Church Music* (both 1832) to the words of the Cowper hymn ‘There is a Fountain Filled with Blood’. Finally in 1835 William Walker, from South Carolina, polished up the tune, gave it a new name – ‘New Britain’ – and set Newton’s ‘Amazing Grace’ to it for the first time. He published it in *Southern Harmony*, a very successful collection which sold an estimated 600,000 copies, mainly in the southern states of America.

In 1844 a compiler, Benjamin Franklin White, published ‘Amazing Grace’ in Philadelphia to the now established tune ‘New Britain’, in another popular collection entitled *The Sacred Harp*. This was

instrumental in spreading the hymn in the northern states. By the American Civil War it had become very popular in the north and was to some extent associated with the Union cause, helped by its inclusion in two hymnals, *Hymns for the Camp and The Soldier's Hymn Book*, which were issued to troops along with the New Testament.

Some say it is an old Scottish tune; others that it is an American plantation song. It could of course be both: an old Scottish melody taken to America by emigrants and later adapted. Certainly the geographical area associated with the source of the tune contained a high percentage of Scottish immigrants. If the tune does have Scottish roots, why was it unknown in Scotland at the time? One answer might be that from time to time, especially during the period of the 'Highland Clearances', entire areas of the Scottish Highlands became depopulated as their inhabitants moved to the New World. One musicologist, Peter Van der Merwe, has argued that it is 'an overwhelmingly Scottish tune' because it uses the 'pentatonic (scale) in a specifically Scottish way' (quoted in Turner, p.123).

What is certain is that Newton never heard his hymn sung to this melody. The familiar tune and words were introduced to Britain during the late nineteenth century. Indeed 'Amazing Grace' was not the most popular of Newton's hymns, the British preferring 'Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken', sung to Haydn's tune known as 'The Austrian Hymn', and 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds'.

It is only with the growth of the record industry that the hymn's popularity has spread internationally. Two recordings out of so many should be mentioned in this respect. The first by Judy Collins made the pop charts in the USA and Britain in 1971, exemplifying the crossover from gospel and folk music to pop. The second was a recording by the pipes and drums of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards in 1972. This recording has led to pipe bands all over the world making the tune their own, perhaps reinforcing the idea of a Scottish origin for it. Since '9/11' we have heard it played most poignantly by the pipes at funeral and memorial services for members of the New York Fire Department and the NYPD.

During the Civil Rights campaign of the 1960s the hymn became associated with the struggle for equality in the southern states. This is perhaps ironic for a hymn written by a former ship's captain in the slave trade. Later Newton became actively involved in its abolition, was a friend and colleague of William Wilberforce, and lived to see the trade abolished in 1807. He would have been gratified that his words should be associated with the black cause, for he once refused an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from the University of New Jersey, saying that the dreary coast of Africa had been his university and that he would never accept any diploma 'except from the poor blacks'.

Bibliography

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