

SECULAR TUNES IN HYMNODY

PART I.

THE ethics that govern the introduction of secular tunes into religious Worship have never been quite settled. The dictum that the devil should not retain the best tunes has been accepted by many a devout churchman. And, again, the introduction of such tunes, or any kind of secular music, into the ritual of the Church has been as hotly resented.

The history of the subject, however, points to the probabilities that all religious music, or song, sprang in a great measure from popular and secular sources. I do not personally believe, with certain writers, that the common tunes of the people had their origin with the Church, in technical form and character. I am strongly of opinion that the reverse is more likely. In its early stages, the Church did all in its power to enlist popular sympathy. In fact, with the social element so strongly encouraged by all modern churches and chapels, we have the same spirit among us to-day. We have lantern and kinema services, and a number of other attractions - all with a view to bring people into close touch with the purely religious side of church worship.

The Psalms were unsingable by the people in their prose translation, and we learn from Dr. Frere's learned essay in the historical edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* that one of the first persons to paraphrase them into singable rhyme was Clement Marot, court poet, and valet de chambre to Francis the First of France. In 1533 he included a metrical paraphrase of a Psalm in a published work, and later published many others. Dr. Frere says these were set to familiar ballad tunes and (no doubt from this fact) were popular at court. Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and others of the same period followed Marot's lead, and their choice of the ballad metre indicates the secular tendency of the music. Whether any of the tones which appear in *The Whole Booke of Psalms Collected into English metre by T. Sternhold and J. Hopkins*, 1562, belonged to secular song in other countries is a matter of conjecture - the chances are, I think, that some of them were the familiar ballad tunes which Marot had selected for his versions. The title pages of Sternhold and Hopkins' Psalter, for nearly a century after its first appearance, refer to them as 'very mete to be used by all sortes of people, privately for their solace and comfort; laying apart all ungodly songs and ballads which tend only to the nourishing of vice and corrupting of youth.' To pass further down in the sixteenth century, there is the well-known *Ane Compendious Booke of Godly and Spiritual Songs*, first published at Edinburgh in 1590, and afterwards reprinted by Andro Hart in 1621. As all students of the subject know, this was a collection of religious hymns, not only directed to be sung to the popular songs of the time, but of parodies of the words.

For example, the 'King's Hunt is up' - the original words of which run:

*The hunt is up, the hunt is up
And it is well nigh day,
And Harry our King is gone hunting
To bring his deer to bay.*

This is parodied:

*With hunts up, with hunts up
It is now perfite day,
Jesus our King is gone in hunting,
Quha likes to speed, they may.*

In similar style of parody is 'John cum kiss me now,' 'Hey now the day dallis,' the first being a parody of an English song, the second being 'Hey, now the day dawes,' the original tune selected by Burns for his 'Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled.' Another song parodied is 'Go from my window go,' and others might be cited. The success of this book brought forth others from the Scottish press, one being *The Saints' Recreation*, 1683. This is full of parodies of Scottish songs in the same style as the

preceding work. Mr. William Geddes, the editor, or author, makes an apology for fitting spiritual songs to secular airs. He puts it thus: 'I cannot omit here to obviate an objection which may be raised by some inconsiderate persons, which is this: "O!" say they, "we remember some of these ayres, or tunes, were sung heretobefore with amorous sonnets, where-in were (maybe) some obscene-like expressions." To this I answer, that in this practice I have the precedent of some of the most pious, grave and zealous divines in this kingdom who, having good purpose, have composed godly songs to the tunes of such old songs as these: "The bonny broom," "I'll never leave thee," "We'll all go pull the heather," and such like, and yet without any challenge or disparagement. Secondly, it is alleged by some, and that not without some colour of reason, that many of our ayres or tunes are made by good angels, but the letters or lines of our songs by devils. We choose the part angelical and leave the diabolical, etc, etc.'

It would not be difficult to find references to spiritual songs being set to popular tunes at this date. One reference in Shakespeare may be quoted. In *The Winter's Tale*, a clown, speaking of the Shearers, says there is 'but one Puritan amongst them, and he sings Psalms to hornpipes.'

The Rev. Ralph Erskine, a minister of the gospel at Dunfermline, wrote a book which had great favour both in England and Scotland: *Gospel Sonnets or Spiritual Songs*. In some of the editions of his work (notably the sixteenth, printed at Edinburgh in 1775), is Erskine's 'Smoking Spiritualized,' being a paraphrase of the clever old song on Tobacco ('Tobacco is an Indian weed'). Erskine's verses begin:

*Was this small plant for thee cut down?
So was the Plant of great renown
Which mercy sends
For nobler ends,
Thus think and smoke tobacco.*

*Doth juice medicinal proceed
From such a naughty foreign weed?
Then what's the pow'r
Of Jesse's flow'r
Thus think and smoke tobacco.*

and so on for three more verses.

Users of the 'naughty foreign weed' might do well to bear in mind the spiritual significance that can be drawn from a pipe of tobacco, as shown by both the old song and Ralph Erskine's version. A number of the sonnets are in singable metre, and it is quite probable they were written to be sung to secular melodies.

By all the references I have quoted we can see that there was a feeling in these early days for simple melody to be united to simple hymns or spiritual songs, but of this there was a great lack, and so it seemed that the easiest way out of the difficulty was to use the familiar song tunes of the day. There were, of course, the tunes united to the metrical psalms, and, without doubt, the most favourite of these would be employed.

The great composers of church music were engaged in more elaborate work than the composition of simple hymn or psalm tunes, and it was not until near the middle of the eighteenth century that a race of composers sprang up who were willing to aim lower, and supply simple, homely worshippers with simple, homely tunes.

The Methodist movement fostered this production of hymn tunes, and after the first Methodist collection many other gatherings of purely religious tunes soon followed. The makers of the best of these tunes were not always professional musicians; in fact, a great many were in humble life, and engaged in very mundane occupations.

The tunes were none the worse for this origin, for they were earnest offerings to the glory of God, and as such had a force and a standing that much mere professional work lacked.

How secular tunes invaded religious song at a period later than what I have up to now dealt with must be left for the succeeding article.

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