

Olney Hymns 1779

Part 1 – The book and its origins

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Anglican evangelical hymnody has yet to receive the full attention it deserves. Surveys of English hymnody have given some account of it,¹ as have studies of evangelicalism,² and there have been treatments of certain aspects of evangelical singing,³ but, as yet, there is no adequate account of its origins and development in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, when such a work is written an important place will be given to *Olney Hymns*, published two hundred years ago in 1779. The publication of this collection of hymns by John Newton and William Cowper came at a turning-point in the development of evangelical hymnody. Up to that time, the singing of hymns among Anglican evangelicals was primarily a private, informal practice for the home or the prayer meeting. In parish churches only the metrical psalms of the Old or New Versions were sung, usually by a small choir or as a solo by the parish clerk, rarely as a congregational exercise. In general it was only in proprietary chapels, and very often under the influence of the Countess of Huntingdon, that Anglican evangelicals sang hymns as part of their worship. However, when the *Olney Hymns* first appeared, the practice of singing hymns was becoming more common in those parish churches where there was an evangelical ministry. *Olney Hymns* has a unique place in the development of evangelical hymnody in that, unlike hymn books which preceded and succeeded it, which were compilations of hymns written by various authors, it included only those by Newton and Cowper. Newton wrote in the preface: ‘The public may be assured that the whole number were composed by two persons only . . . [and are] intended as a monument to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship.’⁴

The seeds which eventually flowered in the publishing of the hymn book were sown before the two authors arrived in Olney. Both men had been involved in the informal hymn-singing of the house and prayer meeting. In Liverpool, Newton wrote of ‘a fixed little company who come to my house on a sabbath evening after tea. We spend an hour or more in prayer and singing, and part between six and seven.’⁵ Here in embryo was the weekly Sunday meeting Newton would hold in Olney and for which he would write his hymns. Cowper, staying with the Unwins in Huntingdon, gives a vivid picture of the daily exercises of an evangelical household and the place hymn-singing had within it:

We breakfast commonly between eight and nine; till eleven, we read either the Scripture, or the sermons of some faithful preacher of those holy mysteries; at eleven we attend divine service, which is performed here twice every day;⁶ and from twelve to three we separate and amuse ourselves as we please . . . If it rains, or is too windy for walking, we either converse within doors, or sing some hymns of Martin’s collection, and by the help of Mrs Unwin’s harpsichord make up a tolerable concert, in which our hearts, I hope, are the best and most musical performers. After tea we . . . walk . . . At night we read and converse as before, till supper, and commonly finish the evening either with hymns or a sermon; and last of all the family are called to prayers.⁷

The ‘Martin’ mentioned in the letter was Martin Madan, a cousin of Cowper’s, who was a well-known London preacher, the chaplain and founder of the Lock Hospital. The ‘collection’ was Madan’s hymn book: *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns Extracted from*

Various Authors, London 1760. This influential hymn book, which contained 170 hymns by authors such as Charles Wesley, Watts and Cennick—some considerably rewritten by Madan—may well have been the book Newton used for his hymn-singing in Liverpool in 1764, referred to above. Madan was on close friendly terms with Newton at this stage; for example, Madan accompanied Newton on an early visit to Olney before his appointment to the parish and had previously presented Newton with a gown and cassock so that he might preach in St George’s Church, Liverpool.⁸

Just exactly when each of the two men began to write hymns themselves is not entirely clear, but both had begun to do so before their friendship blossomed in Olney. According to Robert Southey, Cowper began his hymn-writing in July 1765, while staying with Dr Cotton in St Albans recovering from a period of deep depression. Southey assigns two hymns to this stay: *How blest thy creature is, O God* [III/44],⁹ and *Far from the world, O Lord, I flee* [III/45].¹⁰ Southey, however, does not offer any evidence why these hymns are to be assigned to this date. Newton’s earliest datable hymn comes from the following year: his thoughts on the eclipse of the moon, *The moon in silver glory shone* [II/85], are specifically dated ‘July 30.1766’.¹¹

Cowper moved to Olney on 14 September 1767, and it is probable that his first published hymn was written for the weekly prayer meetings that Newton had introduced. This hymn was *Hark, my soul! it is the Lord* [I/118] which was published in the second edition of Thomas Maxfield’s *Collections of Psalms and Hymns*, London 1768.¹² Newton’s ministry attracted a growing number of people. The year after his arrival in Olney a new gallery was built in the church and it was regularly full. Likewise, the prayer meetings were fully attended and a larger meeting-place was required. Lord Dartmouth, the patron of the parish, owned but did not use the ‘Great House’ between the church and mill in Olney and Newton was readily granted permission to use it. He wrote to an old friend, Captain Alexander Clunie, in a letter dated 1 April 1769: ‘We are going to remove our prayer meetings to the great room in the Great House . . . We propose to open it next Tuesday evening; but if the present sharp weather continues, we may defer a week longer. It is a noble place, with a parlour behind it, and holds one hundred and thirty people conveniently.’¹³ Cowper and Newton each wrote a hymn for the occasion: *O Lord! our languid souls inspire* [II/43]¹⁴—and *Jesus, where’er thy people meet* [II/44]¹⁵—with their appropriate sentiments: ‘Thou hast given a place for prayer’; ‘Thy former mercies here renew’; and ‘Fill this wider space’.¹⁶

Between 1769 and 1773 the output of hymns steadily increased. The first reference in Newton’s diary to hymn-writing appears under the date ‘Sunday 6. Dec. 1772: Expounded my new hymn at the Great House on the subject of a burdened sinner.’ [III/6]¹⁷ A year later he was able to report, 30 November 1773: ‘I usually make one hymn a week to expound at the Great House.’¹⁸ It was undoubtedly out of this increased activity of hymn-writing that the idea of compiling their own hymn book matured. The project was no doubt encouraged by other hymn-writing friends. Such a one was John Ryland the younger, a Baptist minister in Northampton. A number of Ryland’s hymns were published in *The Gospel Magazine* between 1771 and 1782, one of them ‘Composed on the road from Oulney [sic] to Northampton, May 4, 1772.’¹⁹ Three of the early *Olney Hymns* were also published in *The Gospel Magazine* in 1771:

In uno Jesu omnia:

Why should I fear the darkest hour [III/46]²⁰

An hymn:

Cheer up, my soul, there is a throne of grace [III/11]²¹
The love of Christ:
Hark, my soul! it is the Lord [I/118]²²

Another friend of Cowper and Newton was Richard Conyers, Vicar of Helmsley, Yorkshire. In the second edition of *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, London 1772, he included three of Cowper's hymns:

O! for a closer walk with God [I/3]²³
There is a fountain filled with blood [I/79]
When darkness long had veiled my mind [III/23]²⁴

In the preface to *Olney Hymns*, Newton explains that the hymn book should have appeared much earlier than 1779: 'We had not proceeded far upon our proposed plan, before my dear friend was prevented, by a long and affecting indisposition, from affording me any further assistance. My grief and disappointment were great; I hung my harp upon the willows, and for some time thought myself determined to proceed no further without him.'²⁵ The illness Newton refers to was a long period of mental instability which led Cowper to attempted suicide in October 1773.²⁶ The implication of Newton's preface is that after this period Cowper composed no more hymns. This appears confirmed by later correspondence between Cowper and William Bull, an independent minister of Newport Pagnell. Nearly ten years after the publication of *Olney Hymns*, Bull encouraged Cowper to take up the task of writing hymns again. Cowper replied, 25 May 1788: 'Ask possibilities, and they shall be performed; but ask not hymns from a man suffering despair as I do. I could not sing the Lord's song were it to save my life, banished as I am, not to a strange land, but to a remoteness from his presence, in comparison with which the distance from east to west is no distance.'²⁷ Bull did, however, persuade Cowper to translate some of the hymns of Madame Guyon.²⁸ Rowland Hill managed, by subterfuge, to get Cowper to revise his *Divine Hymns attempted in easy language for the use of Children*, London, 1790.²⁹ Cowper did agree to write a hymn for a special occasion in 1789, but it was something of a trial for him:

'My friend the vicar of the next parish engaged me, the day before yesterday, to furnish him with a hymn, to be sung on the occasion of his preaching to the children of the Sunday School; of which I have not yet produced a syllable.'³⁰

The hymn was presumably written, and is probably the same one that was used the following year in *Olney*.³¹ Thus Cowper's main period of hymn-writing dates from before the end of 1773; and all of these hymns, apart from one fragment of two stanzas,³² were published in *Olney Hymns*, that is, 67 of them.³³

Cowper's incapacity threw the completion of the hymn book into doubt. Newton explained in the preface that he could not proceed on his own, so the project was put on one side; indeed, it is likely that at this stage Newton thought it would never be finished. This is suggested by the number of hymns which appeared in print in 1774. That year Newton issued, under the pseudonym 'Omicron', *Twenty Six Letters on Religious Subjects to which are added Hymns &c*, London 1774. The hymns are:

- 1 Encouraged by thy word [I/81]
- 2 Elijah's example declares [I/35]
- 3 Precious Bible! what a treasure [II/63]

- 4 The moon has but a borrowed light [II/86]
- 5 Dear Lord, accept a sinful heart [III/26]³⁴
- 6 God gives his mercies to be spent [I/55]
- 7 God moves in a mysterious way [III/15]³⁴
- 8 The Church a garden is [I/103]³⁴
- 9 Let us *love*, and *sing*, and *wonder* [III/82]³⁴
- 10 I asked the Lord that I might grow [III/36]
- 11 Oft as the bell, with solemn toll [II/74]
- 12 Does it not grief, and wonder move [II/14]
- 13 While the ceaseless course the sun [II/1]

These hymns proved immensely and immediately popular. *The Gospel Magazine*, 1774, reprinted three³⁶; Richard Conyers took over most of them and printed two more for the first time in the third edition of his *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, 1774:

Safely through another week [II/40]
Let worldly minds the world pursue [III/59];

and Lady Huntingdon's collection of the same year included some of the Omicron hymns as well as printing for the first time

'Tis my happiness below [III/16]

This favourable reception of these hymns encouraged Newton to re-examine the original project he had begun with Cowper. He observes in the preface: 'My mind was afterward led to resume the service'.³⁷ Thus from about the middle of the year 1774 onwards there are references in his diary and letters to the composition of hymns:

Date	First Line	Source ³⁸
1774		
June	If the Lord our leader be [I/9]	202
26 June	Day of judgement, day of wonders! [II/77]	203 ³⁹
1775		
22 Jan	From Sheba a distant report [I/34]	208
29 Jan	One awful word which Jesus spoke [I/97]	208
Feb	Though troubles assail [I/7]	208
Feb	A worldling spent each day [I/105]	208
5 Mar	I would, but cannot sing [I/126]	208
11 June	The gathering clouds, with aspect dark [II/64]	210 ⁴⁰
8 Sep	Although on massy pillars built [II/68]	dated
19 Nov	Afflictions do not come alone [I/135]	214
1776		
27 Jan	The lion that on Samson roared [I/24]	219
Oct	As the sun's enlivening eye [II/71]	222
13 Dec	O may the power which melts the rock [II/65]	dated
1777		

22 Sep Wearied by day with toils and cares [II/69] dated

1778

27 Feb While Joshua led the armed bands [II/66] dated
July A lion, though by nature wild [II/93] 229

Four more were published between 1775 and 1776 in *The Gospel Magazine*:

1775

Jan p 44 Lord, thou hast won [I/121]
Apr p 188 A glance from heaven, with sweet effect [II/84]
Oct p 475 When my Saviour, my Shepherd is near [III/30]

1776

May p 234 That man no guard or weapon needs [II/48]

Most of Newton's hymns are linked with his preaching, especially for the Sunday evening prayer meeting at the Great House. Either the hymn grew out of the biblical text or subject he was preaching on, or his sermon grew out of the hymn that he had written. But it is fascinating to note how special occasions and happenings inspired him to compose hymns: II/64 was written 'On the Commencement of Hostilities in America' in 1775; II/68 after an earthquake; II/69 after a fire in Olney;⁴¹ and I/24 during a period of sharp, frosty weather.⁴² II/71, 'At Parting', was written, according to Bull,⁴³ on the occasion of the operation for a tumour on Newton's thigh, performed at Guy's Hospital on 10 October 1776.⁴⁴ It is possible that II/48 (which is footnoted in *Olney Hymns*: 'Wherever a separation is threatened between a minister and people who dearly love each other, this hymn may be seasonable as it once was in Olney'⁴⁵), was written at about the same time. Most interesting is the background to II/93. Newton explained how he came to write it in a letter to William Bull, 7 July 1778:

Last week we had a lion in town: I went to see him. He was wonderfully tame: as familiar with his keeper, as docile and obedient as a spaniel; yet the man told me he had his surly fits, when he durst not touch him. No looking-glass could express my face more justly than this lion did my heart. I could trace every feature. As wild and fierce by nature, yea, much more so; but grace has in some measure tamed me. I know and love my Keeper, and sometimes watch his looks, that I may learn his will. But oh! I have my surly fits too—seasons when I relapse into the savage again—as though I had forgotten all. I got a hymn out of this lion, which you will see when you come to Olney, if you please me.⁴⁶

- 1 A lion, though by nature wild,
 The art of man can tame;
 He stands before his keeper, mild,
 And gentle as a lamb.
- 3 But man himself, who thus subdues
 The fiercest beasts of prey,
 A nature more unfeeling shows,
 And far more fierce than they.
- 4 Though by the Lord preserved and fed,
 He proves rebellious still;
 And while he eats his maker's bread,
 Resists his holy will.

- 8 Yet we are but renewed in part,
The lion still remains;
Lord, drive him wholly from my heart,
Or keep him fast in chains.⁴⁷

Although Newton did at some periods complete approximately one new hymn-text each week, such as the five hymns written at the beginning of 1775, there were interruptions. When, for instance, there were visiting preachers at the Great House, there were no new hymns from Newton.⁴⁸ Thus the gathering together sufficient material for the hymn book was a long process. Newton wrote in the preface: ‘My progress in it, amidst a variety of other engagements, has been slow; yet in the course of years, the hymns amounted to a considerable number.’⁴⁹

Newton was still hesitant about publishing the hymn book because he ‘had so few of my friend’s Hymns to insert in the collection’,⁵⁰ but other friends encouraged him to go ahead. Further, there was the added incentive of putting the record straight with regard to authorship. At the beginning of the preface, Newton wrote: ‘Copies of a few of these Hymns have already appeared in periodical publications, and in some recent collections. I have observed one or two of them attributed to persons who certainly had no concern in them but as transcribers.’⁵¹ When he had submitted hymns to *The Gospel Magazine*, he signed himself ‘Omicron’ or ‘Vigil’, and Cowper as ‘Omega’. But as the hymns circulated in manuscript form,⁵² some were submitted for publication by others. For instance, Cowper’s *God moves in a mysterious way* [III/15] appeared in *The Gospel Magazine* in July 1774 (p 307) over the initials ‘J. W.’, and in December 1777 (p 577f) it was reprinted again with an additional verse⁵³ and attributed to ‘Miss Uffington’ of Islington.

Newton originally collected the hymns together in a simple numerical order⁵⁴ but, presumably towards the end of 1778, he began rearranging them into three books. In the preface he explained the scheme:

The Hymns I have distributed into Three Books. In the first I have classed those which are formed upon select passages of Scripture, and placed them in the order of the Books of the Old and New Testament. The Second contains occasional Hymns, suited to particular seasons, or suggested by particular events or subjects. The Third book is miscellaneous, comprising a variety of subjects relative to a life of faith in the Son of God, which have no express reference, either to a single text of Scripture or incident. These are further subdivided into distinct heads.⁵⁵

By the end of January 1779, the work was nearing completion. Newton wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth on 2 February 1779:

I have been busied of late in transcribing a volume of hymns, which is almost ready for the press. A much smaller proportion of them than at first hoped for are my dear Mr Cowper’s; the greater part will be my own . . . I long withstood the solicitations of friends to print, in the hope of seeing him at liberty to return to the work, but as that desirable hour is not yet arrived, I am at length compelled to yield and to send them abroad as they are. My chief motive for mentioning this is to inform your lordship and Lady Dartmouth that I shall take the liberty to beg your acceptance of two copies when they shall appear in print.⁵⁶

One of the last hymns to find a place in the collection is II/67, which is dated ‘February 10, 1779’. Five days later the work was presumably complete when Newton signed the preface:

This publication, which, with my humble prayer to the Lord for his blessing upon it, I offer to the service and acceptance of all who love the LORD JESUS CHRIST in sincerity, of every name and in every place, into whose hands it may come. I more particularly dedicate to my dear friends in the parish and neighbourhood of OLNEY, for whose use the hymns were originally composed, as a testimony of the sincere love I bear them, and as a token of my gratitude to the Lord and to them, for the comfort and satisfaction with which the discharge of my ministry among them has been attended . . .

Olney, Bucks,
Feb 15, 1779

JOHN NEWTON⁵⁷

A few days later, 23 February 1779, Newton wrote to William Bull: 'In the midst of many interruptions and engagements, his [the Lord's] good hand with me enabled me to finish the hymn book. It went to London last week, and perhaps by this time has found its way to the press.'⁵⁸

The same month a notable development took place in the parish of Olney; the house-meeting on Sunday evenings had outgrown even the Great House and was transferred to the church.⁵⁹ Evening Prayer was said in the afternoon and now was added a third full service, albeit a non-liturgical one, for each Sunday. John Henry Johanson⁶⁰ has rightly drawn attention to the fact that the hymns were originally written for use at the Olney prayer meetings rather than the church services, but he is misleading in the assertion that the hymn book was not intended for church use. It is revealing indeed that the very month that the collection was sent to the publisher Newton moved the prayer-meeting, with its warm hymn-singing, into the church. And once the hymn book had been admitted into the church it would not have been long before it would have been used at the other services as well; the publication of the hymn book and the moving of the Sunday evening prayer meeting into the church significantly coincide with the growth of congregational hymn-singing in other evangelical parishes.

According to one writer,⁶¹ Newton's friend and philanthropic supporter, John Thornton of Clapham, bore the publication expenses. Thornton certainly bought a thousand copies to distribute to all and sundry,⁶² a purchase which probably would have covered most if not all the publication costs.

No publication date was set. On 13 June, Newton wrote to Lord Dartmouth: 'I believe the hymn books I mentioned will wait upon your Lordship and Lady Dartmouth soon',⁶³ then again, on 13 August: 'I hope the Olney hymn book waited upon your Lordship in the course of last month.'⁶⁴ Also during August he wrote a letter in such a way that implied the recipient had a copy of the hymn book to hand. To William Bull he wrote, 19 August, complaining of rheumatism in his left arm: 'Pray for me. My present experience answers to Book iii, hymn 34.'⁶⁵ Therefore it seems that the collection was available to the public sometime during July 1779.⁶⁶

From time to time the suggestion has been made that William Romaine registered opposition to *Olney Hymns* when it was published.⁶⁷ This is a confusion created by Southey in an additional note appended to the first volume of his edition of Cowper's works.⁶⁸ Romaine's *Essay on Psalmody* appeared four years before *Olney Hymns* was published, and it was aimed principally against Watts and not the Olney hymn-writers.⁶⁹ Romaine firmly believed that only metrical psalmody was appropriate for Anglican worship. Newton disagreed. In a letter

to Thornton, 3 August 1775, he took issue with the views of Romaine: 'I do not feel myself hurt by this censure of modern hymn-writers . . . Some of us here know that the Lord has comforted us by hymns, which express Scriptural truths, though not confined to the words of David's Psalms; and we know, by the effects, we are not mistaken.'⁷⁰ In the same letter he also drew attention to the growing use of hymns by other Anglican evangelicals and pointed to the hymn books of Madan, Whitefield, Berridge and Conyers. Four years later Cowper and Newton joined them by bringing out their own book of hymns.

The hymns themselves can be divided into various categories. First, there is the narrative type which seeks to recast the biblical passage into verse, in much the same style as the metrical psalms, but usually with some form of personal application in the later verses. Many of the first book are of this type (e.g. I/25, 40, 105, etc.). Second, a single theme or picture is drawn from several biblical passages, and again applied. One of Cowper's finest hymns is of this type [I/6—on Genesis 22:14]:

- 1 The saints should never be dismayed,
 Nor sink in hopeless fear;
 For when they least expect his aid,
 The Saviour will appear.

- 2 This Abraham found, he raised the knife,
 God saw, and said, 'Forbear';
 Yon ram shall yield his meaner life,
 Behold the victim there.

Then the similar experiences of David and Jonah are recounted:

- 6 Wait for his seasonable aid,
 And though it tarry wait:
 The promise may be long delayed,
 It cannot come too late.

Third, many of the hymns are autobiographical as they recount experiential faith. In a good many of Newton's hymns there is reference to his own dramatic conversion during his earlier sea-faring years. For example [I/62]:

How lost was my condition,
Till Jesus made me whole!
There is but one Physician
Can cure a sin-sick soul.
Next door to death he found me,
And snatched me from the grave;
To tell to all around me
His wondrous power to save.

The same personal testimony is found in another hymn, which has become somewhat popular in recent years [I/41]:

- 1 Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound!)

That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

- 2 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

But Cowper, too, was autobiographical in his hymns, although his experience was somewhat different, and tragically so [I/3]:

- 2 Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus, and his word?
- 3 What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void,
The world can never fill.
[See also I/64, III/8, etc.]

Newton's best-loved hymn, *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds* [I/57] has the following verse:

- 5 Jesus! my shepherd, Husband, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King;
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.

This accumulation of titles is a frequently used technique, especially 'Shepherd, Husband, Friend' [e.g. I/89; II/37, 43, 44, 50, 94; III/30, etc.].⁷¹

Although the hymns are the highly individualistic products of their authors, it is possible to see traces of the influence of other poets and writers. This is particularly so with Newton. He was brought up from an early age on the hymns of Isaac Watts,⁷² and his love for them is reflected in his letters all through his life.⁷³ Thus one can hear echoes of Watts' hymns in some of Newton's verse, though Newton never matches Watts' objectivity. Herbert was Newton's favourite poet⁷⁴ and his influence can also be traced [e.g. III/12]. Samuel Duffield was convinced that Newton paraphrased a number of Latin hymns; in particular he thought that *Day of judgement, day of wonders* [II/77] is based on the *Dies Irae*, and *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds* [I/57] on *Jesus dulcis memoria*.⁷⁵ But such affinities are to be explained by a coincidence of themes rather than direct translation or paraphrasing. One hymn, however, does fall into that category. When the wounded spirit hears [III/56] is headed 'Imitated from the German'. Newton had his German contacts⁷⁶ and had been involved in writing new material for Thornton's edition of Bogatzky's *A Golden Treasury for the Children of God . . . With Some Alterations and Improvements by various Hands*, London 1775.⁷⁷ Significantly, when Catherine Winkworth explained for English readers the ethos of the *Cöthenische Lieder*, 1736, of Bogatzky and others, she wrote: 'Both in character, and in

the position it occupied in the religious history of the time, this book strongly resembled the *Olney Hymns* of Newton and Cowper.’⁷⁸ Although no German original of III/56 is obvious, it is in tune with the piety of the Bogatzky circle.

‘One defect’, wrote Elliott-Binns, ‘of this otherwise excellent collection is its apparent disregard of the Church’s calendar. In Book II, entitled ‘Seasons’, there is nothing for Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Good Friday, Eastertide or Whitsuntide, and for Christmas Day only three hymns are provided. The most important season to judge by the thirty hymns allocated to it is New Year; on the other hand, seasons unknown to the Church, such as Saturday, Evening and the Close of the Year, find ample provision.’⁷⁹ This is correct, and if the volume is examined further it will also be found to contain but few versifications of the psalms. It is therefore highly likely that (certainly during the years the collection was being written, and probably after it was published) another hymn book was used in Olney to supply these other needs. At the very least the parish would have used either the Old or New Versions of the Psalms, but if another book was used then it would surely have been Madan’s *Collection*, which was the most widely-used hymn book of the period.

Samuel Duffield, a writer not noted for his accuracy, claimed that ‘several of Cowper’s . . . hymns . . . were re-touched by Joseph Johnson, the publisher of the Olney collection’,⁸⁰ and for evidence appealed to the letter Cowper wrote to Newton, 7 July 1781. But an examination of the letter reveals that the retouching was being suggested for some other work (Cowper speaks of ‘paragraphs’) and not the hymn book.⁸¹ It is hardly conceivable that only the work of one author should be revised, and, furthermore, there would have been no incentive to make slight verbal changes because the book had a practical purpose: how could the hymns be sung in a large congregation if different editions had different words? There was indeed a second edition of *Olney Hymns* in 1781, but it was a straight reprint of the first—as all the fifty or more editions which followed it have been:⁸²

London, 1779, 1781, 1783, 1784, 1787, 1788, 1792, 1797, 1806, 1807, 1810, 1815, 1816, 1818, 1820, 1824, 1825, 1826, 1831, 1847, 1855, 1857, 1859, 1873

Whitehall, 1805

Chiswick, 1818, 1819, 1822, 1834

York, 1825

Warrington, 1802

Norwich, 1821

Olney, 1979 (Bicentenary facsimile)

Berwick, 1812, 1820

Edinburgh, 1797, 1809, 1821, 1877

Glasgow, 1829, 1830, 1840, 1843

New York, 1790, 1808, 1810

Philadelphia, 1791, 1792, 1812

Burlington, N. J., 1795

(to be continued)

Part 2 will appear in the next issue of *Churchman*.

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Endnotes:

- 1) e.g. F. J. Gilman, *The Evolution of the English Hymn* (Allen & Unwin: London 1927); C. S. Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present* (SPCK: London 1937); A. E. Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns: Backgrounds and Interpretations* (Scribner: New York 1950).
- 2) e.g. G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (Longmans: London 1933); L. E. Elliott-Binns, *The Early Evangelicals: A Religious and Social Study* (Lutterworth: London 1953).
- 3) e.g. N. Temperley, *Jonathan Gray and Church Music in York 1770-1840* (Borthwick Papers No. 51) (Borthwick Institute of Historical Research: York 1977).
- 4) *Olney Hymns*, first edition of 1779 (hereafter cited as OH), p v f.
- 5) Letter, Sunday 27 January 1764; J. Bull, *John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth. An Autobiography and Narrative, Compiled Chiefly from his Diary and other Unpublished Documents* (Religious Tract Society: London [1868]) (hereafter cited as Bull, *Autobiography*), p 138; cp. the letter to John Catlett written the previous year, 8 February 1763: 'I have a few friends who meet at my house once a fortnight, and we spend an hour or two in worshipping the God who made us'; J. Bull, *Letters by the Rev. John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth* (Religious Tract Society: London [1869]) (hereafter cited as Bull, *Letters*), p 37.
- 6) i.e. Morning and Evening Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer.
- 7) Letter, 20 October 1766; R. Southey, *The Life and Works of William Cowper*, (Baldwin & Cradock: London 1836 ff.) (hereafter cited as Cowper, *Works*), Vol. 3, p 283f.
- 8) B. Martin, *John Newton: A Biography* (Heinemann: London 1950), p 202. Madan preached at Olney during Newton's early years there, e.g., on 5 June 1766, a sermon which Newton thought 'excellent'; Bull, *Autobiography*, p 149.
- 9) The Roman numerals refer to the three books of the collection, and the Arabic to the number of the hymns in each of the books.
- 10) Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 1, pp 150-3. There are many popular anecdotes regarding the origins of some of the hymns which are either apocryphal or unverifiable: none are referred to here.
- 11) OH p 283.
- 12) See J. Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, revised edition (Murray: London 1915), pp 488 & 543. The hymn was reprinted in *The Gospel Magazine*, August 1771, p 370 (signed 'Omega') and in the third edition of Conyers' *Collection* of 1774.
- 13) Bull, *Letters*, p 65.
- 14) The first stanza has been generally omitted by hymn-book editors and the hymn is better known from the beginning of its second stanza: *Dear Shepherd of thy people, hear.*
- 15) Bull, *Autobiography*, p 166. Bull adds a confusing footnote (repeated in Julian, op. cit., p 602) to the effect that Cowper could not have written the hymn for this occasion because he was not

in Olney at the time. This is an oversight: Cowper had moved to Olney some two years before the opening meeting at the Great House in 1769.

- 16) See Julian, *op. cit.*, p 603.
- 17) Bull, *Autobiography*, p 183.
- 18) *ibid.*, p 199.
- 19) *The Gospel Magazine*, September 1772, p 440.
- 20) *ibid.*, June 1771, p 288.
- 21) *ibid.*, July 1771, p 327, signed 'Omicron', as was III/46, but neither appeared in the *Omicron Letters* of 1774. For OH the first line was altered to: *Cheer up, my soul, there is a mercy-seat.*
- 22) *ibid.*, August 1771, p 370; it was reprinted from Maxfield's *Collection*, 1768; see note 12 above.
- 23) Reprinted in Augustus Toplady, *Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship* (London 1776).
- 24) This early form of four stanzas was later expanded to six before it was published in OH.
- 25) OH p vi.
- 26) Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 1, p 250 et seq.
- 27) *ibid.*, Vol. 6, p 160.
- 28) *ibid.*, Vol. 9, pp v f & 1-59.
- 29) *ibid.*, Vol. 6, pp 269 & 296.
- 30) *ibid.*, Vol. 15, p 215; letter dated 12 August 1789.
- 31) 'Hymn for the use of the Sunday School at Olney, July 1790'; *ibid.*, Vol. 10, p 25f.
- 32) *ibid.*, Vol. 8, p 112.
- 33) *ibid.*, Vol. 8, pp 51-111, where Cowper's hymns are given in the order they appear in *Olney Hymns*. Newton's share in the project was 281 hymns.
- 34) Reprinted in Toplady's *Psalms & Hymns*, 1776.
- 35) Newton completed the hymn on 30 November 1773; Bull, *Autobiography*, p 199.
- 36) I/35 in April, p 163; III/82 in May, p 211; and III/15 in July, p 307.
- 37) OH, p vi.
- 38) Numerals refer to page numbers in Bull, *Autobiography*; 'dated' indicates that the date of composition is recorded in OH.

- 39) Bull records that it 'took up most of two days to finish.'
- 40) It was printed in *The Gospel Magazine*, July 1775, p 329, and again in May 1778, p 149.
- 41) On the fire see *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, with *Memoir* by Richard Cecil (Nelson: Edinburgh 1835) (hereafter cited as Newton, *Works*, or Cecil, *Memoir*), Cecil *Memoir*, p 51; Bull, *Autobiography*, p 225.
- 42) Bull, *Autobiography*, p 219.
- 43) *ibid.*, p 222.
- 44) Cecil, *Memoir*, p 50.
- 45) OH, p 239.
- 46) Bull, *Autobiography*, p 229; see also Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 3, p 301.
- 47) OH, p 292 f.
- 48) See, e.g., diary entry dated Saturday 27 January 1776; Bull, *Autobiography*, p 219.
- 49) OH p vi f.
- 50) OH p vii.
- 51) OH p v.
- 52) *ibid.*
- 53) 'When midnight shades are all withdrawn
The opening day shall rise,
Whose ever calm and cloudless morn
Shall know no lowering skies.'
- 54) For instance, II/64 originally had the number 207; Bull, *Autobiography*, p 210.
- 55) OH p xi.
- 56) *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, 15th Report), Appendix, Part I, Vol. 3 (Eyre & Spottiswoode: London 1896), p 245.
- 57) OH p xii f.
- 58) *One Hundred and Twenty Nine Letters from the Rev. John Newton . . . to the Rev. William Bull* (Hamilton, Adams & Co: London 1847) (hereafter cited as *129 Letters*), p 46.
- 59) Bull, *Autobiography*, p 233.
- 60) J. H. Johanson, *The Olney Hymns* (The Papers of the Hymn Society 20) (The Hymn Society of America: New York 1956), p 13.
- 61) T. Wright, *The Life of William Cowper* (Unwin: London 1892), p 236.

- 62) Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 1, p 269.
- 63) *Dartmouth Manuscripts* (see note 56). p 248.
- 64) *ibid.* Newton also gives a further account of the collection's origin: 'It was my custom for several years to compose a new hymn for our evening public service on the Lord's day. I seldom attempted more except at the entrance of the New Years, and these in the course of time amounted to a number sufficient to make a sizeable volume, including the few which my dear friend had prepared before his illness.'
- 65) *129 Letters*, p 55.
- 66) Copies of the first edition are held in the British Library, London; Dr Williams's Library, London; The Bodleian Library, Oxford; and the Library of Congress, Washington. A facsimile of the first edition was issued in February 1979, by the Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney, to mark the bicentenary.
- 67) e.g. Wright, *loc. cit.*
- 68) Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 1, p 336.
- 69) See R. A. Leaver, 'Isaac Watts's Hermeneutical Principles and the Decline of English Metrical Psalmody', *Churchman*, Vol. 92, 1978, p 60, note 17.
- 70) Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 1, p 336. Newton nevertheless remained on the friendliest of terms with Romaine; see Bull, *Autobiography*, pp 224, 245f, etc.
- 71) See also Newton's letter to Daniel West, 20 April 1773: 'Is it not happiness . . . to be able to say of the Maker of heaven and earth, He is my Beloved, my Shepherd, my Saviour, and my Husband'; Bull, *Letters*, p 134 f.
- 72) Cecil, *Memoir*, p 3.
- 73) See, e.g., 3 August 1775, Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 1, p 336; 15 August 1776, *Twenty-Five Letters, Hitherto Unpublished, of the Rev. John Newton* (Johnstone: Edinburgh 1840) p 115; 24 May 1800, Bull, *Letters*, p 357; cp. the preface to OH (p viii) where Newton expresses the opinion that many of Watts's hymns 'are admirable patterns in this species of writing.'
- 74) Cecil, *Memoir*, p 95.
- 75) S. W. Duffield, *English Hymns: Their Authors and History* (Funk & Wagnals: New York 1886) pp 129 & 234 respectively.
- 76) See *129 Letters*, p 74.
- 77) Bull, *Autobiography*, p 182.
- 78) C. Winkworth, *Christian Singers of Germany* (Macmillan: London [1869]) p 273 f.
- 79) Elliott-Bins, *op. cit.*, p 417.
- 80) Duffield, *op. cit.*, p 214.
- 81) Cowper, *Works*, Vol. 15, p 78 f.

- 82) The list is based on the catalogues of the British Library, the Bodleian Library, the Library of Congress, as well as particular copies I have been able to discover elsewhere. The list does not take into account a number of undated editions.