



The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship (Classic Reprint)

Louis F. Benson



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It will be a part of our present task to show how relatively modern a practice the singing of hymns is in the Churches of our English tongue, and with what struggle they won their place. To love hymns in eighteenth century Scotland was to be accused of heresy; in England it was to be convicted of that worse thing, enthusiasm. I gave her privately a crown, wrote Dr. Johnson of a girl who came to the sacrament in a bed-gown, though I saw Hart shymns in her hand. 1W hat seemed memorable to that kind heart was not his act of charity, but his having surmounted on the occasion a churchmans rooted prejudice against hymns. They bore the stamp of a clamorous dis sent, and it took the attrition of a protracted circulation to rub off that mark. Not till after the middle of the nineteenth century did the English Hymn win the general esteem which Germany had given to her hymns since the Reformation. To our literary critics it bears the mark of dissent still, and they find it irksome to give to hymns the attention so cheerfully bestowed on folk-poetry, ballads and lullabies. Remembering that Cowper sometimes reaches the simplicity of greatness, says Dr. Schelling in his study of the English Lyric,² we may accept ..even the Olney Hymns though we need not read them. For Watts, whose noble hymn, Our God, our Help in ages past, a million Englishmen are singing with voices broken by the strain of war, and for the Wesleys, whose songs might almost be said to have deflected the current of English history, the most that our critic is able to do, as he passes on his singing way, is to accord them the respect that Prayers and Meditations, Easter day, 1764: Works of Johnson, Oxford, 1825, vol. ix, p. 221. 2F elix E. Schelling, The English Lyric, Boston, 1913, p. 139.

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