

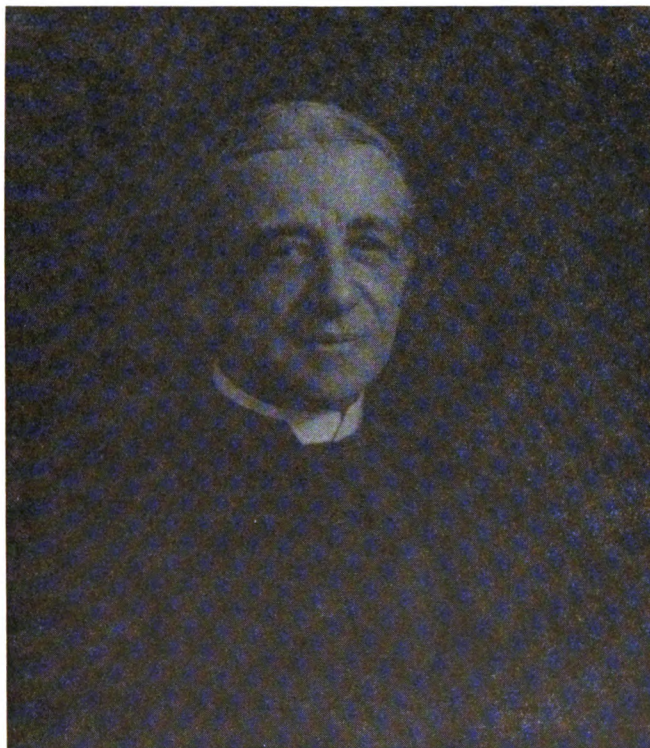
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LOUIS FITZGERALD BENSON
1855 - 1930

Volume 6

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The Hymn

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CONTENTS

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE	110
THE EDITOR'S COLUMN	112
LOUIS F. BENSON—MAN OF VISION	113
<i>George Litch Knight</i>	
A SCOT CONSIDERS THE ENGLISH HYMN TUNE, 1900-1950	117
<i>Kenneth G. Finlay</i>	
CAROL: "LIGHT THE CANDLE MERRILY"	124
Text— <i>Aline E. Hughes</i> Tune— <i>Corliss R. Arnold</i>	
ORIENTIS PARTIBUS	126
<i>Thomas J. Williams</i>	
HYMN: "CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE"	130
Text— <i>J. Donald Hughes</i> Tune— <i>Lee H. Bristol, Jr.</i>	
A LETTER TO THE EDITORS	132
REVIEWS	134
THE HYMN, VOLUME 6, 1955, TABLE OF CONTENTS	139

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Louis F. Benson—Man of Vision

GEORGE LITCH KNIGHT

THE HYMN SOCIETY of America is privileged to pay tribute to the memory of Louis FitzGerald Benson. His name stands prominently in the field of American hymnology. He was the author of *Paper I* of this Society, "The Hymns of John Bunyan," and a memorial service for Dr. Benson on January 18, 1931, at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City was the occasion of a sermon by William Pierson Merrill, later published as *Paper II*, "The Religious Value of Hymns." Dr. Merrill paid deserved tribute to Benson as a hymnologist and a leader in the improvement of public and private worship.

The stature of Louis F. Benson, a man of vision, cannot be overstressed. He was the pre-eminent American hymnologist, and might well be called the "American Julian" of his own day. His efforts as a hymnal editor brought the accolade, "the editor of an epoch-making book." Henry Wilder Foote, in *Three Centuries of American Hymnody*, said of him:

No other American author of the twentieth century has made any contribution to our knowledge of hymnody comparable to Dr. Benson's, and only two or three have written as many hymns of fine quality.

As The Hymn Society of America promotes the celebration of Dr. Benson's Centenary during the coming year, we shall endeavor to acquaint this generation with the greatness of the man we honor. Morgan Phelps Noyes has completed *Paper XIX of The Hymn Society*, "Louis F. Benson, Hymnologist." A commemorative leaflet containing several Benson hymns and prayers is available for use at services honoring him.

Dr. Benson was far ahead of many in his own day and time in his conception of hymnal editing. In the 1895 Presbyterian *Hymnal*, edited by him, there is evidence of his scholarly insight in the arrangement of the hymns contained therein. Part I included hymns suitable for specific times of worship; Part II was called "Hymns of Faith," with hymns arranged in order following the Apostles' Creed; Part III was labeled "Occasional Hymns," and Part IV was given over to "Ancient Hymns and Canticles." In the revision—or actually, the supplement—of 1917, a fifth section containing "Patriotic Hymns," was added.

That Dr. Benson was sensitive to changing trends in theological and hymnological taste is indicated by the careful revision of the 1895 *Hymnal* by him in 1911. At that time a number of the social gospel hymns, including "Where cross the crowded ways of life," were included. The catholicity of Benson's editorial judgment and genius

grows as one studies hymnals he edited. His knowledge of Latin and Greek hymns made possible his own beautiful translations of them at a time when many hymnal editors were either ignorant of or hostile to their use in evangelical churches.

Hymnals come and go. The passage of time brings new interests and in time it was necessary to revise the 1895 book so carefully and wisely edited by Dr. Benson. The 1933 *Hymnal* was considerably different from the earlier volume, especially in the inclusion of stanzas of hymns within the musical staves as opposed to Benson's insistence upon having the hymns printed so as more effectively to serve for devotional use by having all stanzas but the first printed below the music.

In his volume *Hymns and Human Life* Erik Routley wrote:

We must not forget, either, the hymns of Louis F. Benson, author of the classic book, *The English Hymn*; his hymns are sung in America and not in this country, but even in his own land he has had less recognition than he deserves.

To some extent Routley is right in his assessment of Benson's standing in our own country. This led the writer to check a number of hymnals published during the past thirty years in this country and in Canada to ascertain to what extent Benson was actually represented in them. The results of this research are most interesting. Before detailed comments on the subject, I might say in passing that one reason why hymns from his pen have not become better known has been the fact that most of them have not been wedded to a "proper tune." (And this is due, undoubtedly in some measure, to the fact that he published some of them privately with tunes written by friends for the specific hymn text; some of the composers were long on friendship and somewhat short on musical ability.) Another possible reason for the apparent slowness with which his hymns have become known in the church is that some of them are really more poems than hymns, and lack the quality of universality so important in the text of a hymn to be sung by a congregation. One recalls Henry Ward Beecher's insistence that "Abide with me" be placed in a category labeled "For devotional use only" in the *Plymouth Collection*.

To what extent, then, has Louis Benson as a hymn writer come to be represented in contemporary hymnals? The Presbyterian *Hymnal* of 1933 contains eight of his hymns and translations, one being included an additional time in the Orisons. *The Methodist Hymnal* contains five hymns, one a translation from the Latin. The Episcopal *Hymnal* of 1918 contained but one, "O Thou Whose feet," the same one being the sole representative of its author in the 1940 *Hymnal*.

The Evangelical and Reformed *Hymnal* of 1941 includes five. Non-denominational books have included a larger number: *The New Church Hymnal* (1937) includes four; Tweedy's *Christian Worship and Praise* (1940) includes three; the *Christian Hymnal* (1945) edited by Clementine Miller Tangeman, has two; *At Worship*, a recent hymnal for young churchmen, edited by Richard Weagly of Riverside Church, New York City, has four.

The Congregational *Pilgrim Hymnal*, presently being revised, contained no Benson hymn, but the *Mennonite Hymnary* did include "O sing a song of Bethlehem." *The Brethren Hymnal*, published a few years ago, included five. Many readers will recall the rather unusual and unique *Interchurch Hymnal* of two decades ago which did include "The sun is on the land and sea." Strange as it may seem, the *Riverdale Hymnal*, edited by Emily S. Perkins, founder of The Hymn Society and close personal friend of Dr. Benson, had none of his hymns—and this in spite of the fact that Miss Perkins composed tunes which he included in his own private edition of hymns. Dr. Coffin's *Hymns of the Kingdom of God* did not contain a Benson hymn in the first edition, but a later revision contained "The light of God is falling."

Our Canadian neighbors have done quite well by Benson. *The Church Hymnary* for the United Church of Canada, 1930, included three of his hymns, one being his revision of "Safely through another week." *The Book of Praise* (1938) for the Church of England in Canada, included "O sing a song of Bethlehem" though with a revision of the word "song" to *hymn* throughout. The musical setting was an effective one by Alfred Whitehead.

A careful search of representative British Hymnals of the past twenty-five years bore out Mr. Routley's contention that Benson was virtually unknown there. However, the Scottish Presbyterian *Church Hymnary* did include "O sing a song of Bethlehem." *The School Hymn Book*, published by the Methodist Church in England has "O Thou Whose feet have climbed life's hill."

In our own country H. Augustine Smith edited a number of hymnals during his long and fruitful career. In his *Hymns for the Living Age* not one of Benson's hymns is used; however, in the 1937 hymnal edited by him, *The New Church Hymnal*, there are four. In Smith's *American Student Hymnal* of 1928 there are four Benson hymns, one of them set to a hymn tune arranged by Clarence Dickinson.

Hymnals published for young people in the Presbyterian Church have made liberal use of Benson hymns. *The Church School Hymnal for Youth* (1928) includes eight Benson hymns, among them "Patient

shepherds keeping," a charming and pleasing Christmas hymn, set to the tune GLENFINLAS, from the pen of Kenneth G. Finlay, one of the leading Scottish church musicians of our own day. *The Hymnal for Youth* (1942) also published by the Presbyterian Church, contains nine Benson hymns.

It might be of interest that Dr. Albert Edward Bailey, in *The Gospel in Hymns*, mentions Benson only in connection with his translation of the "Stabat Mater." Evidently there were not enough of Benson's hymns in the books which formed the basis for Bailey's study.

Louis FitzGerald Benson was truly a man of vision. He looked ahead and anticipated the needs of worshiping congregations. He recognized the need for hymns about the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. He welcomed a revival of worship—the recovery of lost treasures of devotion—and though most of his life was spent during the social gospel era, he maintained a balanced perspective and probably recognized, more than we realize, the theological movement in which we find ourselves today.

Benson was not well recognized as a hymn writer in his own day. It will be most interesting to discover whether this and oncoming generations come to have a deeper appreciation of his abilities in this line than has been evident during the past three decades. It will be to the enrichment of the church's worship if there should be a wide use and appreciation of this great man's vision and genius, so generously given to the glory of Almighty God.

This article represents the substance of an address by the writer upon the occasion of the inauguration of the Benson Centenary at the Annual Meeting of The Hymn Society of America on May 15, 1955, in the Chapel of The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City.

A SERVICE COMMEMORATING the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dr. Louis F. Benson, distinguished hymnologist, author of *The English Hymn*, hymn writer, and poet, has been prepared for the use of churches observing the Benson Centenary. Copies of the six-page folder containing the complete service may be obtained from The Hymn Society of America, 297 Fourth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y. Single copies 10 cents each. Ten copies or more, 8 cents each. Fifty copies or more 5 cents each.