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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

HENRY FRANCIS LYTE, 1793-1847

THE HYMN *Abide with me* is one of the prized spiritual treasures of Christendom. Multitudes the world over have been recalling the story of its author, who died a century ago. Brixham in Devon is specially charged with the guardianship of the memory of Henry Francis Lyte, for there he was clergyman for twenty-five years. But Scotland has its own link with him, in that, through circumstances hitherto unexplained, he happened to be born at Ednam, near Kelso, on 1st June, 1793.

His Ednam days were few, however. Both his parents were English; his father an army captain of roving disposition, soon to be posted for service in the wars; his mother a gentle lady of whom he ever retained tender memories. At the age of nine he was sent to boarding school at Enniskillen in Ireland, whence he proceeded in due course to Trinity College, Dublin, graduating in 1814. At College he laid the foundation of wide literary scholarship and gave promise of poetic gifts, winning for three years in succession the Vice-Chancellor's Prize for English verse. He manifested also the remarkable aptitude for friendship which characterised him throughout his life. In lines addressed to an old student friend he recalls

Those Attic nights we've passed
With the fond few who felt and thought as we,
Chiding the hours that stole away so fast
On wings of reason, wit and minstrelsy.

A gay, buoyant, aspiring heart that knew the stirrings of the poet's Immortal Mood.

In 1815 he took Orders in the Church of Ireland and was appointed curate of a country parish near Wexford. This he found a dreary business, and was glad to accept the invitation of a neighbouring squire to reside in his mansion as tutor to his sons. "Here," he writes, "I lived comfortably enough, riding about, shooting, dancing, attending on my curacy every Sunday." Perhaps that is a little suggestive of Parson Merryman, of whose type there were too many in those days in the Irish Establishment, and not there only.

But already the Evangelical Revival, which had been powerfully affecting the Church of England, was exerting an influence

in Ireland too. In England the Evangelicals at that time were the most vital religious force; and a recent historian of the Irish Church says of them that they laid the foundation, in that Church, "of serious devotion, pastoral efficiency, and ministerial responsibility". Lyte and his friends had been wont to laugh at the Evangelicals as "methodists", "enthusiasts", "weak simpletons unable rationally to defend their tenets". But now he was brought into intimate contact with one of them in the solemnity of approaching death, and learnt to know the power of simple faith in the atoning Death of Christ. In his own words, "I was greatly affected . . . and brought to look at life and its issue with a different eye than before; and I began to study my Bible and preach in a different manner than I had previously done". It was in fact an evangelical conversion.

Possibly Lyte would never have allowed himself to be labelled an "evangelical" in the partisan sense as commonly used, though in his Brixham ministry he actively shared in the religious and social enterprises characteristic of the evangelicals. His literary and artistic temperament would be naturally averse to what was then contemptuously termed enthusiasm. He found himself in sympathy with the Oxford Tractarian Movement in its earlier stages, and reacted strongly against the individualistic evangelism of the Plymouth Brethren who from 1830 onwards invaded his parish and drew away some of his Church people and some even of his Church workers. His daughter certainly resented this propaganda, and in her Memoir of her father labours the point that he became a High Churchman. If this was so it must have been in the sense of Keble rather than that of Newman. Lyte shows no sign of being at any time fascinated by Rome; indeed he was repelled by Romanism in its own land. In any case, the evangelical note of repentance and trust in the redeeming work of Christ dominates all his religious poetry.

Soon after his conversion a serious breakdown in health necessitated a prolonged holiday on the continent and incapacitated Lyte for steady clerical work for several years. Indeed ill-health pursued him for the rest of his days. He bore it with patience and fortitude. Moments of despondency he knew, but they were quickly overcome by radiant faith in the goodness of God. His last letters, written often in extreme weakness,

breathe a spirit not of mere resignation but of acceptance, nay of glad Christian acceptance of his cross. It has been remarked that a certain sadness colours his religious verse. He dwells much on the frailty and transience of human life; on the world as a vale of woe where no satisfying joys are to be found; on the blessed life of another world as man's best and only hope. With him such sentiments are not merely conventional, but spring from personal experience of much tribulation. What happiness could have been his had he not lived within hail of the Better Country? To the modern mind this may diminish his appeal, for we tend to stress healthy, active, almost secular Christianity. But he will be understood by those in any age who are tried and bruised and broken and yet find in Christian faith hope and strength and song. He sings out of and to their condition.

Through the weary years of sickness that consumed his early manhood he gave way to no sense of frustration. Literature was always his passion. Now it was his solace and he made a vast and varied field his own. He loved the classical Anglican Divines, and admired especially the works of the Non-Jurors, those serious High Churchmen whose consistent belief in the Divine Right of Kings precluded them from accepting deliverance from the tyranny of James II at the hands of William of Orange. He rediscovered an interesting and undeservedly forgotten Welsh poet and hymn-writer called Henry Vaughan, and edited and published his works. And he also wrote and published his first little volume of Tales in verse illustrative of some of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, which was fortunate enough to receive favourable notice from even an Edinburgh reviewer.

Lyte had not returned to Ireland after his breakdown, but had tried various places in South-West England in search of one where climatic conditions would suit his delicate frame. At last in 1823 he was sufficiently restored to take up parish work again, and was appointed incumbent at Brixham, a somewhat unlikely sphere, it might appear, for one who "loved to hover about the confines of Parnassus". Brixham certainly lay far removed from literary interests and cultured circles. Originally a small fishing village and seaport, it had recently greatly increased in size and importance by becoming a naval and military station during the Napoleonic Wars. That phase

was past but had left a legacy of moral and social problems. The Church of England was represented in the town by a chapel-of-ease, a product of the early nineteenth-century Church Extension Movement, and, like so many Churches of that period, a building plain to ugliness. But at least the appointment allowed him to make his home in a region with as genial a climate as England had to offer. He found a house on Berry Head, a headland overlooking the town, and commanding exquisite views over the harbour, Torbay and the Channel, prospects which enthralled him. Here with his devoted family, his garden and his books, he lived happily till even Devon at last proved too stern a stepdame to her adopted son. From 1844 he was compelled to spend the winters abroad in Mediterranean lands. He died at Nice on November 20th, 1847, and was buried in the English Cemetery there.

In twenty years, however, Lyte had made his mark in Brixham and was credited with having produced a moral regeneration in the town. His church, raised to parochial status and partially rebuilt during his ministry, and since completed with a memorial tower, remains his monument in England. He took a deep interest in his sea-faring folk, visiting them on board ship, circulating the Scriptures among them, and preparing for them a simple and beautiful manual of devotion. His work among the young, by whom he was beloved, was specially notable. The Sunday School movement, the pioneer of universal popular education, was still in its infancy, and Lyte threw himself into it wholeheartedly. He gathered 700 children into his schools, and found and trained a band of some seventy teachers. He was never happier than when teaching the children to sing hymns which he had composed for them, and he could romp with them too! His charge might be a humble one but he fulfilled its duties with conspicuous devotion.

In Brixham he completed his most ambitious literary project, the book entitled *The Spirit of the Psalms*. Always a lover of the Psalms, he had from time to time essayed the difficult task of paraphrasing them in English verse, and this he continued assiduously. The hours thus spent, he says, "have been among the most pleasing and profitable of his life. It has sweetly filled up the intervals of laborious ministerial duty and solaced many of the trials to which human life is ever subject". But that was not his main purpose. His aim was to extend the use of the

Psalms in public worship, and his idea was not to produce a new metrical version, but "to condense the leading sentiments of each Psalm" into a canticle of suitable length for congregational singing, or, in other words, "to give the spirit of each Psalm". When chanting of the Psalter became general in the Church of England, as it did a generation or two later, his purpose was fulfilled in another and perhaps a better way. I do not suppose any one would dream of substituting Lyte's version for any of the portions of our own Scots Metrical Psalter that are in common use. I am not sure that he was specially successful in the endeavour to recapture the spirit of the Psalms, for which a highly developed historical sense is essential. But on occasion his touch is sure, e.g. his rendering of Psalm 103. *The Spirit of the Psalms* is the source of nearly all of Lyte's work that has found a place in the Hymn Books. But there is one great exception—the hymn with which his name will always be associated.

Various accounts have been given of the origin of *Abide with me*. This is what his daughter has to say in her Memoir of her father, published in 1850, three years after his death.

The summer was passing away and the month of September (that month in which he was once more to quit his native land) arrived. . . . His family were surprised and alarmed at his announcing his intention of preaching once more to his people. His weakness and the possible danger attending the effort were urged to prevent it but in vain. "It was better," as he used often playfully to say when in comparative health, "to wear out than to rust out." . . . He did preach . . . and afterwards assisted at the administration of the Holy Eucharist, and though necessarily much exhausted by the exertion and excitement, yet his friends had no reason to believe it had been hurtful to him. In the evening of the same day he placed in the hands of a near and dear relative the little hymn *Abide with me* with an air of his own composing adapted to the words. Within a few hours after this the little party . . . set out on their journey towards the genial south, a journey which he never completed.

Whether or not the hymn was written on that last Sunday evening in his own home and under a sense of the deepening shadows of evening falling upon his life, it is needless to discuss. The hymn expresses to perfection the quintessence of his Christian experience. It is a song welling up from the depths of his soul. Earlier in that same year Lyte had written a poem which he entitled *Declining Days*.

Why do I sigh to find
Life's evening shadows gathering round my way?

It was not that his soul shrank to hear "Eternity's long surge
Break o'er the shores of time". It was not that he dreaded
the Judgment:

Weak—sinful as I am,
Faith clings for refuge to the bleeding Lamb.

It was not that he was loath to part with earth's delights:

No: 'tis the thought that I—
My lamp so low, my sun so nearly set,
Have lived so useless, so unmissed should lie . . .

Might my poor lyre but give
Some simple strain, some spirit-moving lay,
Some sparklet of the soul, that still might live
When I have passed to clay.

Might verse of mine inspire
One virtuous aim, one high resolve impart,
Light in one drooping soul a hallowed fire
Or bind one drooping heart.

As he handed the manuscript of *Abide with me* to his daughter that Sunday evening, did he perchance have an inkling that his wish was granted and that this was to be his supreme gift to his fellow-men and his claim to honoured remembrance? So at least it has proved; for this hymn has been the comfort and support of multitudes, inspiring faith in times of spiritual darkness, and in loneliness bringing assurance of the presence of the Good Companion, who knows every inch of the way, for He has trodden it Himself, and whose Promise is, "Lo, I am with you always".

With a great company we give thanks to God at the remembrance of His good and faithful servant, Henry Francis Lyte.

THE EDITOR.