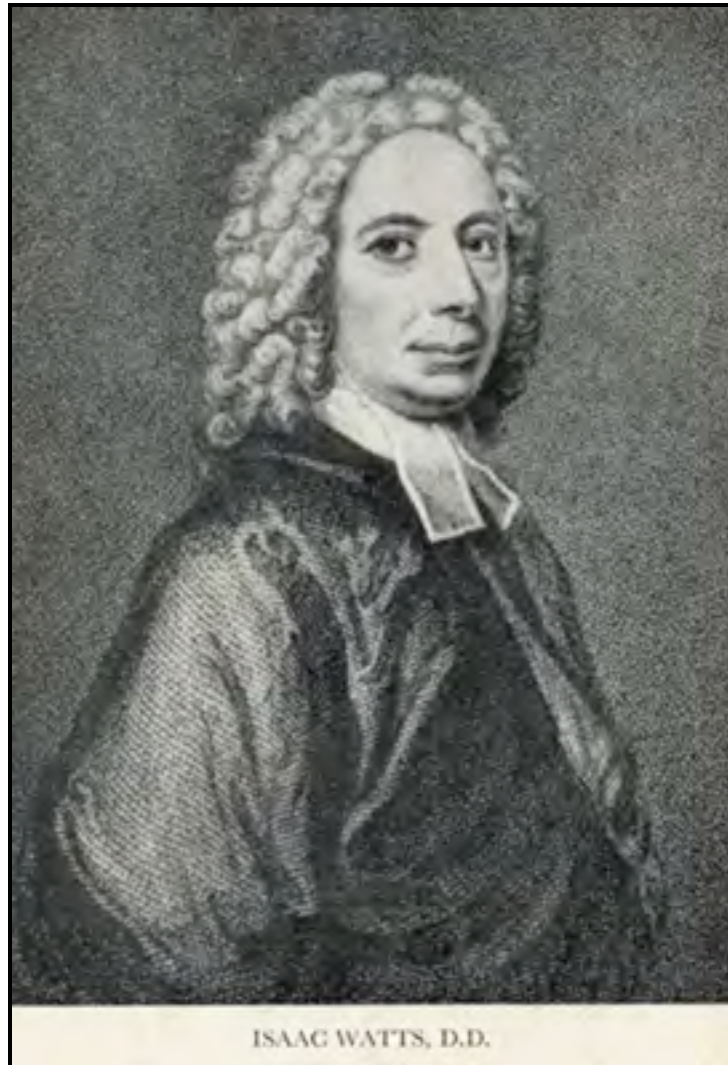


## Isaac Watts and the Shape-Note Tradition

Harry Eskew

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Isaac Watts is widely acknowledged as the "Father of English Hymnody." It was he who developed a philosophy of congregational song that went beyond traditional metrical psalmody. Furthermore, he was the first to write a large body of hymns to become widely used in worship, both in Great Britain and in her American colonies. Anyone who has spent much time with the early singing-school

tunebooks will find the hymns of Isaac Watts by far to be the most frequently used. When did Watts's psalms and hymns become widely used in singing-school tune books, and what factors led to their becoming a part of the shape-note tradition? This study will seek to provide at least some partial answers to these questions and directions for further inquiry.

## Watts's Publications

Isaac Watts's first book of verse, his *Horae Lyricae* (1706), has been described as "a laboratory notebook of his early experiments with Christianized psalms and hymns" and as "the seed-plot of his mature work."<sup>1</sup> In 1709, a second edition of *Horae Lyricae* appeared. This and all subsequent editions omitted several Christianized psalms that had been included in the first edition. However, the second edition was nearly twice the size of the first.

Watts's two major collections for congregational singing are well known. In 1707, he published his hymnal, entitled *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, dividing his hymns into three books, as indicated on the title page:

- I. Collected from the Scriptures.
- II. Compos'd on Divine Subjects.
- III. Prepared for the Lord's Supper.

His first edition included a "Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody," which was not included in later editions. This essay constituted Watts's call for the reform of metrical psalmody.<sup>2</sup> Watts had published Christianized psalms as early as the first edition of his *Horae Lyricae* in 1706, but his crowning work in psalmody, which Watts seemed to regard as his magnum opus of congregational song, was his *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*, published in 1719, some thirteen years after his *Horae Lyricae*.

It did not take long for the psalms and hymns of Watts to be reprinted in the American colonies. Watts's hymns were reprinted in Boston around 1720–1723. Even earlier, in 1715, a selection of twenty-two hymns by Watts had been published in Boston under the title, *Honey Out of the Rock*.<sup>3</sup> None other than Benjamin Franklin published the first American reprint of the Psalms from his

Philadelphia press in 1729. As observed by hymnologist Louis Benson, this reprint "represents his admiration for Watts rather than any actual demand, since Franklin two years afterwards complained of its remaining unsold upon his shelves."<sup>4</sup> Benson lists twenty-nine American reprints of the *Psalms*, fourteen reprints of the *Hymns*, and four American reprints of the *Psalms and Hymns* together.<sup>5</sup> After the American declaration of independence from England in 1776, Watts's *Psalms* appeared in several American revisions, such as those of Mycall, Barlow, and Dwight. In a recent dissertation, Rochelle A. Stackhouse made a detailed study of these American revisions and included a list of numerous later editions published between 1781 and 1835.<sup>6</sup>

In her monumental study of the publishing history of Watts's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Selma L. Bishop listed a growing number of editions published each decade or so in both Britain and America. She described this rapid increase, giving publication figures showing the annual average growth in these editions. She commented: Such advances taken widely indicate growing interest in Watts wherever he was known. Books of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* printed in London experienced instant reprinting in Boston, and vice versa. Watts was second only to Wesley in numbers and second to none in greatness of hymns. John Julian stated: "The great hymns are mostly Watts'." Sir Leslie Stephen holds that for many years 50,000 copies of Watts's *Psalms and Hymns* were annually printed; that his influence was intangible to measurement. [The] Cause of the rising rate in publication of the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* was that all churches sang Watts; that all homes and most schools owned Watts's hymnals. New England children learned to read from Watts's hymnbooks.<sup>7</sup>

Watts's psalms and hymns were so popular that the introduction of new hymns took place by publishing them as supplements to Watts's *Psalms and Hymns*, bound in one volume. One of the best-known of these supplements was that of the London Baptist pastor, John Rippon, popularly known as "Rippon's Selection."<sup>8</sup> Published in London in 1787, it was reprinted in New York as early as 1792.<sup>8</sup> Another of the supplements to Watts's collections, compiled by James M. Winchell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Boston, was known as "Winchell's Watts." In the same volume, after the psalms and hymns of Watts, Winchell attached *A Selection of More than Three Hundred Hymns, from the Most Approved Authors* (1818).<sup>10</sup>

As described by Benson, "Winchell's Watts' attained, and for many years held, in New England a use so wide that it has been described as 'universal.'<sup>11</sup>

### **Watts's Texts Enter Singing–School Tune Books**

Not only were these collections of Watts's psalms and hymns popular in early America, his psalm and hymn texts also found their way into numerous singing–school tune books. This widespread acceptance of Watts's texts by the compilers of tune books was underscored in a communication which I received from the American musicologist, Karl Kroeger:

. . . in the various editing projects I've undertaken, I've been aware of the popularity of Watts with American psalmodists from the very beginning. Billings's *New England Psalm–Singer* uses a number of Watts's hymns, and he continues to be the most important source of tune texts for Billings, Read, Holden, French, Holyoke, etc., on into the 19th century. Every other text source is very secondary to the popularity of Watts. (Tate and Brady's *New Version of the Psalms* is a distant second.) You'll find an enormous number of Watts's texts in all American tune books.<sup>12</sup>

I also asked Nym Cooke, another specialist in early American psalmody, which tunebook was the first to include a significant number of texts by Watts. He responded:

Certainly Read's *American Singing Book* of 1785, with 41 of its 48 metrical texts coming from Watts, is an early example of "Watts's domination." Is 28 of 61 metrical texts in Billings's *Singing Master's Assistant* "significant?" The runners–up here are Messrs. Tate and Brady with 11 texts, then Billings himself with 10.<sup>13</sup>

No New England composer–compiler paid a greater tribute to Watts than Samuel Holyoke of Massachusetts. Holyoke's tune book, *The Columbian Repository of Sacred Harmony*, was published in the first decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Benson described this book "as a colossal monument of the ascendancy of Watts over the congregational praise of New England."<sup>15</sup> Holyoke's tune book of 496 pages includes a complete reprint of Watts's *Psalms of David Imitated* and his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, each set to music in four parts. Benson commented, "As an offering to New England choirs, unable to read at sight or to use so great a variety of music,

it was ineffective from the first; but as a New England tribute to Dr. Watts its testimony remains unimpaired."<sup>15</sup>

Another source providing evidence of the pervasive presence of Watts's texts in early American tune books is Richard Crawford's monumental anthology, *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody*.<sup>16</sup> In this volume Crawford includes 101 of the pieces of sacred music most often printed in America between 1698 and 1810. Of the 101 pieces included, 68 are settings of texts by Watts. These 68 include 45 of his psalms, 22 of his hymns, and one text from his *Horae Lyricae*. It is truly remarkable that 68 of the 101 most-often published pieces of sacred music in our country between 1698 and 1810 were settings of Watts's texts. Clearly Watts dominated early American psalmody long before the (nineteenth-century) advent of the shape-note tradition.

### **Watts Texts Enter the Shape-Note Tradition**

The first system of shape notes to gain general acceptance was that found in *The Easy Instructor* of William Little and William Smith, published in 1801. As settlers moved toward the South and Midwest, shape-note tune books appeared in cities along the routes of travel. To the New England repertory of psalm and hymn tunes, fusing tunes, and anthems was added an additional category—hymns based upon oral tradition that we now call folk hymns. The first shape-note tune book to contain a significant number of folk hymns that were reprinted in subsequent collections was John Wyeth's *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*, published in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1813.<sup>18</sup> After 1813, shape-note tune books were published primarily in three geographical areas. The first was the Midwest, from Cincinnati to St. Louis. The second was from Philadelphia through the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. And the third was further south, including Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia.

The tune books of the Shenandoah Valley are illustrative of the dominance of Watts in the early shape-note tradition. Ananias Davisson's *Kentucky Harmony* of 1816, published in Harrisonburg in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, was the first southern shape-note tune book. Of 137 texts for which authors have been identified in its various editions, 124 were either from Watts or Rippon. In Davisson's *Supplement to the Kentucky Harmony* (1820),

28 of the 88 texts with known authors are by Watts. Although Davisson's *Supplement* was designed for use by Methodists, only two texts were found to be by Wesley, as compared with 28 by Watts. The one Shenandoah Valley tune book which continues in use today is *Genuine Church Music*, compiled by the Mennonite Joseph Funk. Funk, unlike most of his fellow compilers, was careful to indicate the sources of his texts. In the first edition of 1832, he noted 48 texts from Watts's *Psalms* and 47 from Watts's Hymns, for a total of 95 texts by Watts. Clearly Watts was number one among the authors of texts found in early shape-note collections of the Shenandoah Valley.<sup>19</sup>

Watts's texts also dominated the shape-note tune books of other areas, such as the Middle South and the Middle West. The earliest Tennessee shape-note tune book was Alexander Johnson's *Tennessee Harmony*, published in 1818, and a later representative Tennessee tune book is William Caldwell's *Union Harmony* of 1837. In the *Tennessee Harmony*, 83 of 214 texts, or 39 percent, are by Watts; and in the *Union Harmony*, 59 out of 153 texts, again 39 percent, were penned by Watts. The leading shape-note tune book of the Middle West was Allen Carden's *Missouri Harmony*, first published in 1820 and subsequently appearing in nine editions plus numerous reprints through at least 1857.<sup>20</sup> In the ninth edition (1846), some 83 of 214 texts, or approximately 39 percent, are once again by Watts.

### **Watts's Texts in *The Southern Harmony* and *The Sacred Harp***

In the Deep South during the period prior to the Civil War, probably the most popular shape-note tune book was *The Southern Harmony* by William Walker of Spartanburg, South Carolina. First published in 1835, it went through five editions, the last issued in 1854. Walker indicated in 1866 that it had sold about 600,000 copies.<sup>21</sup> *Southern Harmony* has been used in an annual singing in Benton, Kentucky, for well over a century. The 1854 edition was reprinted several times in the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Another Deep South tune book of this period is *The Sacred Harp*, compiled by Benjamin Franklin White and Elisha J. King in western Georgia. First published in 1844, it appeared in two further editions before the Civil War, one in 1850 and the other in 1859. King died

shortly before *The Sacred Harp* was published, but White lived until 1879, fostering the spread of his tune book through singing conventions and serving on revision committees. Today *The Sacred Harp* is the most widely used of the early shape-note tune books, not only in the South, but in singings from coast to coast. The most recent revisions of *The Sacred Harp* were published in 1991 and 1992.<sup>23</sup>

A survey of the texts by Isaac Watts in the three early editions of *The Sacred Harp* and the first five editions of *The Southern Harmony* shows that Watts is well represented, especially in the three editions of *The Sacred Harp*, in which the totals of Watts's texts increased over the course of these editions from 47 to 68 and then to 72. Although somewhat lower, the totals in *The Southern Harmony* nevertheless grew from 35 in the first edition to 61 in the fifth (1854) edition.

In the case of *The Southern Harmony*, Walker gave on his title page the names of the hymnals for whose texts he sought to provide music. In addition to Watts's *Psalms and Hymns*, he listed an unidentified "Methodist Hymn Book" plus several words-only Baptist hymnals then in use in the South. These included: *Mercer's Cluster* (3rd ed., 1817) by the Georgia Baptist pastor, Jesse Mercer;<sup>24</sup> *The Choice* (3rd ed., 1830) by the Virginia Baptist pastor, William Dossey; *Dover Selection* (1828), compiled for the Dover Baptist Association in Virginia by Andrew Broadus; and *Baptist Harmony* (1834) by the South Carolina Baptist pastor, Staunton Burdett. Each of these Baptist hymn compilations of the South contains a significant number of texts authored by Watts. To point out just one example, Dossey's *The Choice* includes 79 texts by Watts. Certainly Walker must have recognized the widespread acceptance of Watts's texts when he chose them for *The Southern Harmony*.

## Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from this overview of the transmission of Watts's texts in early American tune books and the later shape-note tradition? First, the popularity and general acceptance of Watts's psalms and hymns were such that it was only natural that tune book compilers should select his texts for their publications. Furthermore, the tune book tradition was non-

denominational, so publishers sought texts with appeal beyond a single denomination. As observed by Nicholas Temperly in his *Hymn Tune Index*.

Publishers were not disposed to reduce their market by including controversial or narrowly denominational texts, but the "sacred" character of the book was maintained for the sake of custom and decorum. The widely known psalms and hymns of Watts or Tate and Brady suited the purpose well, and supplied the texts for a majority of tunes in these books.<sup>25</sup>

Another conclusion is that Watts continued to be widely accepted even though new hymns were introduced. When supplements to Watts were published by Rippon, Winchell, and others, they printed both Watts's *Psalms and Hymns*, known as the "Watts Entire," along with their selection of new hymn texts, all bound together in one volume. One of the greatest indicators of the acceptance of Watts's texts in early American tune books is the fact that the most frequently printed tunes were often settings of Watts's texts—as evidenced by the 68, out of 101, pieces included by Richard Crawford in his *Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody*. Clearly the dominance of Watts's psalms and hymns continued in the shape-note tradition of the early nineteenth century, as the tune books of the Shenandoah Valley compiled by Ananias Davisson and Joseph Funk, as well as those of Tennessee and Missouri, attest. Furthermore, Watts's texts continued to occupy a leading place in Deep South tune books during the decades before the Civil War. Illustrative of this are the five editions of *The Southern Harmony* and the three editions of *The Sacred Harp* published prior to 1860. Although recent editions of *The Sacred Harp* have not been included in this study, the 1991 revision has a far greater number of Watts' texts—144—than the earlier editions. Quite probably *Sacred Harp* singers are performing even more hymns by Watts today than their predecessors did in earlier times.

There is a great need for more research on Isaac Watts and his impact upon the singing school tradition and upon congregational singing in general. There is no published index to the complete hymns of Watts, including those published in his *Horae Lyricae*, his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, his *Divine Songs*, and his *Psalms of David Imitated*, plus his volumes of sermons. A complete index to



Watts's hymns would certainly facilitate serious research in this field. There is also a need to study further the impact of Watts upon early American psalmody, including the shape-note tradition.

One final observation: although singers performing from *The Southern Harmony* and *The Sacred Harp* and other shape-note tune books sing texts from a variety of hymn writers, without Watts they would have far less to sing. In terms of texts set to music in the early American shape-note tradition, Isaac Watts reigns supreme!

#### Endnotes

1. Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts, Hymnographer: A Study of the Beginnings, Development, and Philosophy of the English Hymn* (London: Independent Press, 1962),
2. *Ibid.*, 175.
3. David W. Music, "Isaac Watts in America Before 1729," *The Hymn* 50 (January 1999), 32.
4. Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship*, rep. ed. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), 162. An alternate interpretation is that Franklin may have thought the psalter would sell well only to find out otherwise over time.
5. *Ibid.*, 163.
6. *Stackhouse's dissertation has been published as The Language of Psalms in Worship: American Revisions of Watts' Psalter*, Drew Studies in Liturgy, 4 (Lanham, MD, and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1997). See esp. pp. 133–139.
7. Selma L. Bishop, *Isaac Watts's Hymns and Spiritual Songs (1707): A Publishing History and a Bibliography* (Ann Arbor, MI: The Pierian Press, 1974)
8. Its full title is *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors, Intended to be an Appendix to Dr. Watts' Psalms and Hymns* (London: Thomas Wilkins, 1787).
9. *Benson, The English Hymn, 144–145 and 163.*

10. James M. Winchell, *An Arrangement of the Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, to which is added a supplement, being a selection of more than three hundred hymns from the most approved authors, including all the hymns of Dr. Watts, adapted to public and private worship, not published in the common editions* (Boston: James Loring, 1823).

11. Rollin H. Neale, *An Address Delivered on the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Organization of the First Baptist Church, Boston, June 7, 1865* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1865), 38, cited in Benson, *The English Hymn*, 204.

12. Email letter from Karl Kroeger to Harry Eskew, 5 October 2000.

13. Email letter from Nym Cooke to Harry Eskew, 6 October 2000.

14. Samuel Holyoke, *The Columbian Repository of Sacred Harmony* (Exeter, NH: n.d.).  
Benson, *The English Hymn*, 172.

15. *The English Hymn*, 172

16. Ibid

17. Richard Crawford, *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody*, 2 vols., *Recent Researches in American Music*, 11 and 12 (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1984).

18. This tune book has been reprinted with a new introduction by Irving Lowens (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964).

19. Harry Lee Eskew, "Shape-Note Hymnody in the Shenandoah Valley, 1816-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1966), 31, 46, and 92.

20. Shirely Bean, Introduction to the reprint edition of Allen Carden's *Missouri Harmony*, 9th ed. [1846] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), x-xiii.

21. William Walker, *The Christian Harmony* (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller and William Walker, 1867), iii.
22. The most recent reprint of the 1854 edition was published together with a musical anthology by the Benton singers on compact disc by the University of Kentucky Press in 1987.
23. These are: *The Sacred Harp* ([Bremen, GA]: Sacred Harp Publishing Co., 1991); and *The B. F. White Sacred Harp*, rev. Cooper ed. (Samson, AL: Sacred Harp Book Company, 1992).
24. A recent study by Kay Norton focuses on the 1810 edition: *Baptist Offspring, Southern Midwife—Jesse Mercer's Cluster of Spiritual Songs (1810): A Study in American Hymnody*, Detroit Monographs in Musicology/Studies in Music, 34 (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2002).
25. Nicolas Temperley, *The Hymn Tune Index*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1:25.
26. Marcus Merrin of Arcadia University in Nova Scotia has compiled a database which seeks to include the first lines of every stanza of Watts's hymn texts. He reported to this writer in late 2002 that he lacks only a few obscure sources to complete his Watts hymn text database. He can be contacted at [marcus.merrin@emptyair.com](mailto:marcus.merrin@emptyair.com).