

REMARKS ON THE LITTLE BOOK

ENTITLED

“HYMNS SACRED TO THE LORD’S TABLE.”

*By William Robson, Esq.*

[READ 8TH MARCH, 1877.]

THE very rare, if not unique little book, which has recently been presented to the Historic Society, and which is here for inspection this evening, is a very early, if not the very earliest book printed in Liverpool. It is a small octavo volume, in its original binding, and in very good preservation; and formed part of the library of the late Dr. Robson, of Warrington.

It is a collection of ninety-three Hymns and three Doxologies, prefaced by an “Address to the Reader,” signed by the compiler, Charles Owen, Warrington, May 1, 1712.

He opens the address by saying—

“One main Intendment of this small Collection is to recreate and refresh our Devotions at the Sacred Banquet, where we have a taste of those Joys that flow from the Supreme Throne.” After several paragraphs in this strain, he describes some particulars of the musical services of the Jews, for which he quotes Lightfoot, vol. ii, and then shortly describes the singing of the “Apostolic and Primitive Christians,” referring to Theodoret, Cassiodorus, St. Austin, Clemens Alexandrinus, Chrysostom, and Eusebius; to the times of Pliny the younger, and to the infamous conduct of “the Cardinal of Lorraine,” who, he alleges, “procured some obscene poems to be turned into French, and set to Psalm-Tunes, and sung in room of the Holy Psalms.”

After which, we have this somewhat interesting historical passage:—“Now, to render this Divine Work more pleasant, especially at the Solemn Feast, I would wish every Communicant would furnish himself with a Book, that they might sing at the Blessed Ordinance without the tiresome way of giving out every Line. This is the Practice of the Reformed Churches abroad, in their Common as well as Sacramental Singing: And if all our Congregations and Families used this Method, it would mightily promote this Heavenly Work, and render it more like the Harmonious Melody Above.”

“If there be any Communicants that can’t read, this will be an inducement to learn, or at least to excite ’em to bring up their Children to reading. And if there be some who are not able to buy Books, it gives the Rich a new Occasion to Honour GOD with their Substance by assisting them.”

The compiler then recommends a quicker way of Singing, which he takes "to be agreeable to the primitive practice;" quotes "the Great Athanasius and St. Austin" in favour of "the quick and expedite Mode of Singing"—and then adds: "But after all, 'tis not the external Voice, or any artificial Turns given to it, that the Almighty regards; the Modulation of the Voice, without a due Elevation of the Heart, is but as a sounding brass, or tinkling Cymbal, a bodily service that profits nothing."

"It remains only that I tell ye, that in the Ensuing Collection, I made use of Tate and Brady's Version of the Psalms, and Mason's Spiritual Songs. A few things I borrow'd from Mr. Herbert, Patrick, Boyes, Stennet, Davies."

"BUT am most obliged to the ingenious Mr. Watts, whose Divine Composures claim the greatest Share in the performance."

One peculiarity in the Hymns as printed, is that they are compiled in many instances by selecting verses out of different original Hymns. Thus, Hymn iii, p. 3 of this collection, is made out of the 5th verse of the 15th Hymn and the 3rd verse of the 16th Hymn of the 2nd Book, and the 5th verse of the 78th Hymn of the 1st Book of Dr. Watts' Hymns; and the remaining three verses the writer is not able to trace. The 4th, 10th, 12th, 13th, 15th, and 17th Hymns are all made up in a like manner; and further than this, the writer has not had time to examine them.

Another peculiarity is, that as Charles Owen was an Arian, he has avoided by alterations, I presume his own, all direct invocation of the Lord Jesus Christ in prayer; he never wearies of ascribing praise to Him, but never passes over the line which regards our Lord as the Creature, and not the Creator. He believes in the doctrine of original sin, of atonement by the Blood of Christ, and of eternal torments, and uses the strongest language and images that could be found to teach and illustrate them.

He was the minister of the Presbyterian congregation that then met for worship in the building now known as the Cairo Street Chapel, Warrington.

The book was originally the property of Wm. Rutter, who appears to have purchased it in 1714, and records the purchase money—"price 5d."

