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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The German "Te Deum"

MANY and rich gifts have we received from the immense treasury of German hymns (said to be larger than that of all the hymns of the rest of the world put together), but to none perhaps are we more indebted than Rinckart's *Now thank we all our God*. In numerous services held in connection with the Coronation it served equally the great Thanksgiving in St. Paul's and the humblest gathering in country chapel or down-town mission hall.

Contrasting greatly with Watts, in certain respects his nearest English parallel, Martin Rinckart was a tall man of imposing presence, black full beard and resounding voice. Nelle tells us he lived with the air of a conqueror, albeit in simple clerical garb, hastening ever to impart Christian hope and consolation to a country desolated by war and famine, pestilence and death. He entered on his pastorate at Eilenburg, a small town near Leipzig, one year before the Thirty Years' War broke out; a ruined man but still "more than conqueror," he laid down his charge, with his life, one year after it ended.

Rinckart's literary work was a far larger thing than the writing of hymns only. In the nineteen large volumes which contain it we find examples of dramatic, lyric, pastoral and religious verse, including many poems in Latin; he "could leave nothing that happened within his ken unsung." Three years before the war began he was crowned as "imperial poet" and his play for the Centenary of the Reformation in 1617 carried his name and fame far through the Lutheran lands. One of the ablest critics of his day maintained that Germany could be as proud of her Rinckart as France of her Ronsard.

Our poet was born at Eilenburg in Saxony on April 24th, 1586. So gifted did he prove in music, song and verse that at the age of fourteen he was granted a scholarship in the Thomasschule at Leipzig, the school which J. Sebastian Bach a century later raised to such world-wide renown. Then he became a student in theology at Leipzig University, covering his expenses by music and singing lessons. In 1611 he went as pastor to Eisleben, the town where Luther had begun and ended his life. There he spent six happy years, five of them at the side of his dearly loved wife, Christina. It was during this period he began his cycle of seven plays on the life of Luther, the first, "The Knight of Eisleben," being acted by his own choir in 1613. Four years later he received with great

joy a call to the pulpit of his native town, Eilenburg. He records in his day-book a quatrain indicating the temper in which he took over this new responsibility :

At Thy word, Lord, my nets I prayerfully review
And in this storm-swept sea I cast them forth anew.
Do Thou with precious souls their emptinesses fill,
Use Thou, Lord, ship and wind and net to work Thy Will.

Henceforth his life was bound up with the fortunes of the little town on the Mulde.

Throughout the grievous years of the War he demonstrated what a good minister of Jesus Christ and a faithful shepherd to his flock should be. Specially terrible were the years 1637, 1638 and 1639. At that time Eilenburg was a walled town and hence soon became choc-a-bloc with refugees. Early in 1637 it was visited with a fearful outbreak of the plague. Over 8,000 people perished, including almost all members of the Town Council and Rinckart's two fellow-clergymen. Before the plague a Montaigne would leave his mayoralty of Bordeaux and flee to the mountains, but a Rinckart is made of sterner stuff and stands his ground. There he remained like a rock, discharging conscientiously every detail of his three-fold task—visiting the sick, comforting the dying and burying with due Christian ritual the dead. His records show that he himself buried 4,480 persons, among them, alas, his beloved help-meet for twenty-five years, Christina. For months on end he was forced to make three visits a day to the pits (there was not labour sufficient to dig so many graves), each time reading the words of Christian hope over eight to twelve corpses. Yet through all this, the pest, as the old record has it, "never touched so much as a finger" of this right valiant soldier of the Cross.

In the following year there appeared the normal companion of plague, famine. The food-lands of the country lay untilled, partly owing to the rush for safety to walled cities and partly to the ravages and pillage of marauding soldiery. A contemporary of Rinckart's puts the matter thus :

Now War and Hunger, his mate,
Are two wretchedly brought-up brothers,
Who with joy tread everything down
They can find, belonging to others.
War always marches ahead;
When with murder and theft and burning
He's content, what Hunger can do
We are not a great while in learning.
For he's so ferociously wild,
Gorging this one, then that, then another,
That when he has swallowed the lot,
He will generally gulp down his brother.¹

¹ F. von Logau, *Simgedichte*, I, 539.

"A stone," says Koch, "would have had pity on the wretched Eilenburger digging through every rubbish heap to find so much as an old bone." From every house there rose a cry for bread. Dogs, cats, rats, pieces of horse carrion, were the prizes for which hundreds strove. Rinckart tells of a *melée* he surprised on the town green, only to find that forty or fifty people were fighting for the possession of a dead crow. He did what he could. For nearly a year he had two bushels of corn baked into bread once or twice a week and dispensed this to the eager crowds besieging his house.

On February 31st, 1639,² the greatly dreaded Swedish troops (deprived since Lützen of their lion-hearted leader, Gustavus Adolphus) entered Eilenburg and demanded a war-levy of 30,000 thalers (£4,500) from the now de-populated town. All remonstrances were rejected by Col. Dörffling, their commander. Then Rinckart went to plead their utter poverty because of the two previous years, but in vain; if not paid, the town would be given over to fire and sword. Rinckart rang the church bells, summoned everyone thither who could walk, and sang with them the touching Reformation hymn of Melancthon's friend, Paul Eber: *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sind*, a true "cry from the depths"; then the pastor prayed long and earnestly. Somehow Dörffling heard of the proceedings and in the end departed—with the precious communion vessels of the church and 2,000 thalers only, a sum to which Rinckart himself contributed heavily. Thereafter Eber's hymn was sung in the churches of Saxony for years, in commemoration of this great deliverance. The pastor soon found himself all but penniless, for foreign troops continued to be quartered in his roomy manse, and litigation re an unjust house-tax inflicted on him by his ungrateful fellow-townsmen consumed the last remnants of his fortune.

It has long been stated, and copied from one manual to another, that *Now thank we all our God* was a swan-song written by Rinckart some months before his death to celebrate the signing of the Peace of Westphalia and the end of the War. This is not true. The hymn had been printed twelve years before, in the *Jesuherzbüchlein*, and Rinckart said of it then that the MS. had already "been fully completed for six or seven years." The mistake probably arose because of the passage of Scripture on which the hymn is based: "Now therefore bless ye the God of all, which only doeth wondrous things everywhere, which exalteth our days from the womb and dealeth with us according to His mercy. He grant us joyfulness of heart and that peace may be in our days in Israel for ever" (*Ecclus.* i. 22-24). At the Thanksgiving Services

² Julian puts this happening in 1635, I cannot tell why. German records are unanimous in attributing it to the date given above.

held in Leipzig on January 1st, 1649, all Swedish chaplains were ordered to preach from this text and the fact that the hymn suited the discourses so perfectly doubtless accounts for the erroneous idea that it was written for that occasion. The truth of the matter, though modern research has not yet been able to establish it, is most likely that Rinckart wrote his poem in honour of the landing, to the joy of all Protestant hearts, of Gustavus Adolphus in Pomerania on June 25th, 1630. The known facts are that Gustavus was Rinckart's hero, that to the end of the King's life Rinckart wrote an annual ode or hymn of praise in his honour and that *Num danket* was said by its author, in 1636, to have been written half a dozen years earlier.

Rinckart composed many other hymns, but this one only has obtained universal recognition; like Löwenstern, Stegmann and Knorr von Rosenroth, he remains for us the man of one hymn. On the strength of it alone he has been styled "the Ambrose of the Protestant Church." Poor hide-bound Opitz was his master and pattern, and the verses are in excellent alexandrines, a measure Opitz so strongly desired to introduce into German literature. But its real origin is far from the domain of belles lettres. Its earliest printed form is prefaced by the words: *A little Grace before Meat, in Parts, by which three little children may ask Grace one after another.*³ So apparently its actual intention was that Samuel (born 1622), Salome (1625) and Anna Sophia (1628) should each repeat a verse before they got to their porridge! Now what was once a rather stately children's prayer has become an international psalm of thanksgiving. Beside our version there exist no less than twelve other recognised translations into English. And its author would seek no higher guerdon than was paid to him when, in the grey dawn of September 2nd, 1870, from every mist-enveloped pine-clad summit surrounding the pit of destruction at Sedan, in which lay 25,000 wounded or dead and where 100 000 Frenchmen, an Emperor among them, were held prisoners, there arose the notes which alone were capable of expressing the feelings of those who had won so great a victory:

Num danket alle Gott
Mit Herzen, Mund und Händen.

Thus has a simple Grace before Meat become the Te Deum of the German people and a paean of praise for all Christendom.

SYDNEY H. MOORE.

³ *Tischgebetelein und Wechselordnung, wo drei Kinderlein eins umbs ander beten.*