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Anne Steele, 1716-1778

ANNE STEELE was the eldest daughter of William Steele, a timber merchant and contractor to the Navy, who regularly for 60 years conducted services in the Baptist Church at Broughton in Hampshire. Half of that time he preached occasionally as a deacon, and the remaining half more regularly as a lay pastor. The Steele family played a great part in the life of the village and the Baptist Church. Anne's great uncle had been its lay pastor for 40 years having been ordained lay pastor in 1699, and had been succeeded by her father. The family was a prosperous one, and gave cottages and a burial ground to the church. The great uncle, Henry Steele, was a remarkable preacher. Bishop Burnet told the local clergyman that he "must preach better than Henry Steele" if he would stop his congregation deserting to the Dissenters.

Anne Steele was born in 1716 (the month is unknown) so that in 1966 we celebrate the 250th anniversary of her birth. She displayed a great love for poetry at an early age, and was soon showing skill at writing verse. At 14 she was baptized and joined her father's church. She wondered whether her verses should be printed, and under the date November 29th, 1757, her father's diary has an entry: "This day Nanny sent part of her composition to London to be printed. I entreat a gracious God, who enabled and stirred her up to such a work, to direct in it and bless it for the good of many."¹ She wrote under the pen name "Theodosia". When her father read the published work he prayed that a blessing might go with it.

Anne Steele had very delicate health, owing to an injury received in childhood. She often suffered severe pain, and was sometimes confined to her bed. Her state of health deteriorated after her fiancé, a Mr. Elscourt, was drowned while bathing in a river a few hours before the time fixed for the wedding.

She died November 11th, 1778, with the words on her lips, "I know my redeemer liveth".

It was in 1760 that Anne Steele published two volumes of *Poems on subjects chiefly devotional*. These were printed in Bristol. They inspired John Ash of Pershore and Caleb Evans of Bristol to compile a Baptist hymn book. It was published in Bristol in 1769 and included, besides hymns by Watts, 62 by Anne Steele and a number by other Baptist writers. This Bristol hymn book, as it came to be

called, was notable for its challenge to the autocratic rule of Watts. An additional volume of Anne Steele's was published, with a note by Dr. Caleb Evans, in 1780. And in 1863 the complete works were published with a memoir by John Sheppard of Frome.

Authorities assert that Anne Steele sounded "a new note in the contents of the English Hymn: the note of introspection".² She was one of the first women in Britain to publish hymns, which were widely used in Britain and America. Garrett Horder said of her: "She is the first English woman who contributed hymns of any importance to the church's treasury of song."³ L. F. Benson says that the depth and sincerity of feeling in her hymns made even Watts seem cold.⁴ Lord Selborne described Anne Steele as "The most popular and perhaps the best of the followers of Watts".⁵ The predominant characteristics of Anne Steele's hymns and poems are:

1. An intense devotion to Christ's person. This is seen very clearly in a hymn on the Saviour's name:

The Saviour! O what endless charms
Dwell in the blissful sound!
Its influence every fear disarms,
And spreads sweet comfort round.⁶

or in

Jesus, the spring of joys divine,
Where all my hopes and comforts flow;
Jesus, no other name but Thine,
Can save me from eternal woe.⁷

2. A morbid dissatisfaction with life, no doubt in part reflecting the state of her health, but also in part reflecting the religious mood of the time:

Ah! why should this mistaken mind
Still rove with restless pain?
Delight on earth expect to find,
Yet still expect in vain?⁸

or

The brightest day, alas, how vain!
With conscious sighs we own;
While clouds of sorrow, care and pain,
O'ershad the smiling noon.⁹

There are lines throughout her hymns and poems which reflect this sense of dissatisfaction with "mortality's unnumbered ills"¹⁰ and a longing for heaven and the desire to "leave this low world and seek the skies".¹¹

3. Where Anne Steele shines is in a close attention to the works of Watts and Doddridge, from whom again and again she catches the true note of the hymn writer. Here her best can bear comparison

with the best of Watts and Doddridge, and it was these poems which were quickly taken into use as hymns.

Psalms and Hymns, published in 1858, included 22 hymns by Anne Steele, most of them of this type. We catch many echoes of Watts as in

Come, dearest Lord, extend Thy reign,
Till rebels rise no more;
Thy praise all nature then shall join
And heaven and earth adore.¹²

One of the best of her hymns in this book was :

Father, whate'er of earthly bliss
Thy sovereign will denies,
Accepted at Thy throne of grace,
Let this petition rise :

Give me a calm, a thankful heart,
From every murmur free;
The blessings of Thy grace impart,
And make me live to Thee.

Let the sweet hope that Thou art mine
My life and death attend;
Thy presence through my journey shine,
And crown my journey's end.¹³

The *Baptist Church Hymnal*, published in 1900, included five hymns by Anne Steele; and the *Baptist Church Hymnal Revised*, of 1933, included two, the same two that are in the *Baptist Hymn Book* of 1962: "Father of mercies, in Thy word" and "The Saviour calls". The first of these two hymns is in almost every known hymn book, including the new *Anglican Hymn Book* and is manifestly her greatest hymn. Originally it consisted of 12 verses, the best of which have been taken to make the present hymn.

Anne Steele's hymns quickly became very popular in America. When, in 1808, the people of Trinity Church, Boston, grew tired of singing psalms and published their own hymn book, out of its 152 hymns 59 were by Anne Steele. In America they called her Mrs. Anne Steele, perhaps as a courtesy title.

In England, in 1854, the Rev. John Kirk published a catalogue of favourite hymns sung in Wesleyan and Methodist churches. He includes 769 hymns, 59 by Watts, six by Doddridge and the rest, with three exceptions, by Charles or John Wesley. The exceptions are three by Anne Steele.

It is interesting to note that Anne Steele devoted the profits from her first two volumes of poems to "purposes of benevolence". Caleb Evans in 1780 editing the additional volume said that the

profits of that volume were being devoted to the Bristol Education Society (now Bristol College). He described it as "an institution worthy of such patronage, and which thinks itself honoured in receiving it". He paid tribute to her unflinching cheerfulness even amid the great pain of her closing years.

Anne Steele has had no biographers, save for the scanty memoir by John Sheppard and two pages in the *Baptist Magazine* of October, 1858, which are mainly devoted to praise of her hymns and which quoted from *The Presbyterian*, an American magazine which gave an article to Anne Steele but was so uncertain of its facts that it did not even know to which denomination she belonged. The editor of the U.S.A. reprint of her works in 1808 sought further biographical details in vain.

There was an occasion in Anne Steele's life when she received a very gracious letter from a lady who had been much helped by her poems. Anne replied to her in the following verse, which may fitly conclude these notes :

If aught you find in Theodosia's lays,
To profit, or to please, transfer the praise
To Him whose bounty every gift bestows;
Since all unmerited that bounty flows.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ *English Hymns*, S. W. Duffield, 1886, p. 537.

² *The English Hymn*, L. F. Benson, 2nd Ed., 1962, p. 214.

³ *The Hymn Lover*, Garrett Horder, N.D., p. 119.

⁴ *The English Hymn*, L. F. Benson, 2nd Ed., 1962, p. 214.

⁵ *The Baptist Hymn Book Companion*, 1962, p. 213.

⁶ From the poem beginning "Come heavenly love". Complete works, 1863.

⁷ From the poem beginning "Christ, the way to heaven". Complete works, 1863.

⁸ From the poem beginning "Faith leads to joys". Complete works, 1863.

⁹ From the poem beginning "How long shall earth's alluring toys". Complete works, 1863.

¹⁰ From the poem beginning "Why is my heart with grief opprest?". Complete works, 1863.

¹¹ From the poem beginning "In vain my roving thoughts". Complete works, 1863.

¹² From the hymn beginning "Jesus in Thy Transporting name", *Psalms and Hymns*, 1858, No. 228.

¹³ *ibid.*, No. 522.

¹⁴ *Steele's hymns and poems*. Complete works, 1863, p. xi.

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