

# Joseph Proud General Baptist, Swedenborgian and Hymnwriter

**I**N 1790, three years after the appearance of John Rippon's *Selection of Hymns*, there was published *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, a volume containing some three-hundred compositions, all of them by one man, Joseph Proud. Until two or three years earlier Proud had been a Baptist Minister. There would seem good reason at a time of revived interest in hymns and hymnology, in recalling him, particularly as no fewer than twenty-one of his compositions are to be found in a hymnbook issued as recently as 1946.

Proud's is an interesting story. It throws a good deal of light on the varying currents to which Baptists were subjected in the closing years of the 18th century. His father, John Proud, was minister of the General Baptist church in Wisbech from 1756 until his death in 1784. This church had a history stretching back into the Commonwealth period. Joseph was eleven years old, when his father settled there. For some years he acted as the older Proud's assistant in a pastorate which towards the end became somewhat stormy. In 1772, however, Joseph moved into Lincolnshire, serving first in Knipton (1772-75) and then in Fleet (1775-86). The General Baptist Churches of Lincolnshire formed an Association on their own, with somewhat tenuous connections with the General Baptist Assembly. Shortly after the death of John Proud the Wisbech church joined the New Connexion, and in 1786 Joseph, following controversy over congregational hymn singing, moved from Fleet to Ben Street church, Norwich. The Norwich church applied that year for membership in the increasingly liberal General Assembly and was received in 1787. The Ben Street building had been erected by an eccentric gentleman named John Hunt, described as a surgeon, ornithologist, and gospeller. The first pastor was Richard Wright, ordained there by Dan Taylor in 1785, but soon becoming a Johnsonian Baptist, then a Unitarian and finally a Universalist. Proud went to Norwich at the invitation of John Hunt, who made the building over to him.

Proud was quickly involved in public controversy in Norwich. He published there what he described as "an easy and familiar poem" with the title *Calvinism Exploded, or partial election and horrid reprobation, proved to be no part of divine truth*, a copy of which may be found in the British Museum. It provoked a rhymed reply entitled *The Incendiary Corrected, or Injured Virtue and Honesty Defended*. Proud had also engaged in a public disputation about believers' baptism with John Bousset, a local Quaker, and this also

led to a pamphlet warfare. In 1788, however, he was introduced to the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg. The so-called New Jerusalem church, based on Swedenborg's teaching, had been organised in London the previous year by five former preachers of Wesley's. Wesley once described Swedenborg as "one of the most ingenious, lively, entertaining madmen, that ever set pen to paper," but also recognised him as "a man of piety," whose strange visions and doctrines were partly, at least, accounted for by severe illness. After some initial hesitation, during which he expressed himself regarding Swedenborg in terms very like those used by Wesley, Joseph Proud threw himself with enthusiasm into the new Church. In a remarkable burst of versifying, said to have occupied him three months, he produced *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, thus providing a hymnbook for the then growing community, and left Norwich for Birmingham, where a wealthy pastor built a chapel for him. For the next thirty years Proud was one of the best known Swedenborgian ministers, gathering considerable congregations in Birmingham, Manchester, and London. He was known as an impressive preacher, and in 1810 ventured again into the world of hymnology with *Hymns and Songs for Children*.

Swedenborgians have remained very loyal to his compositions. The New Church Hymnbook of 1880 contained no fewer than 164 of Proud's hymns. More remarkable is the fact that the new hymnbook of 597 hymns, produced in 1946, retains twenty-one. This 1946 compilation draws on the hymnology of many different Churches. Only one other writer, Charles Wesley, is represented by as many hymns as Proud, after them come J. B. S. Monsell with fifteen and James Montgomery with twelve.

It cannot be contended that any of Proud's compositions are really outstanding, though their sincerity and feeling are obvious. The following verses, in each case the first verse of hymns still in use, indicate their characteristics and the varied metres he was able to employ.

"Thy Name we extol, Jehovah our King,  
For ever in Thee we triumph and sing;  
From morning to evening Thy goodness we praise,  
And while we have being Thine honour we'll raise."

"Though all my foes combine,  
Their power I shall withstand;  
My race I run, through strength divine,  
At God's command."

"The watery deep I pass,  
My heavenly way pursue;  
And through the lonely wilderness  
I Jesus view."

“Rise, rise, ye Christians, rise,  
 In strains of rapture sing;  
 Let songs of praise salute the skies,  
 And welcome God your King.”

There are obvious echoes here of Charles Wesley, who died the year Proud became a Swedenborgian. Proud lived on until 1826, a strange figure, who had he but joined the New Connexion instead of the New Jerusalem Church might have found an honoured place in the somewhat sparse ranks of Baptist hymn writers.

ERNEST A. PAYNE

## A Note on W. T. Whitley

**J.** H. Y. BRIGGS in his article on the sources for 19C nonconformity (*Baptist Quarterly*, January and April, 1969) rightly regretted that W. T. Whitley never finished the third volume of his bibliography which would have added immeasurably to the resources of Baptist history in that century. Not all students of Baptist history are aware that there are in existence the original card files compiled by Whitley as the basis for his third volume. From the comments to be found in the *Quarterly* in 1939-40 we can assume that Whitley was on the verge of putting the volume into manuscript when the war began and then it was too late. The file boxes have been essentially untouched until now and except for some few cards suffering from damp or smearing, the cards, which follow the pattern of the earlier volumes, are as usable as a printed volume. The file may be consulted in the Angus Collection of Regent's Park College, Oxford.

But what of the future of this bibliographic goldmine? Personally I have tried to spread the news of their existence around but the grapevine has proved to be unfortunately short. Although the American Baptist Historical Society has expressed interest in the files being microfilmed their future is uncertain. The argument that this third volume is out of date or incomplete is not a sufficiently compelling reason not to find a means to publish it as best we can. The appearance of the volume in some inexpensive form (at the very least microfilm) would prove to be an invaluable asset to those of us working in the 19C. To bring it up to date and extensively recheck the information demands a man of Whitley's patience and ability: the continuing publication of E. C. Starr's *Baptist Bibliography* should make this unnecessary. However it will be a good many years before this mammoth undertaking finally reaches XYZ, and until then the potential of this fine, although somewhat dampened, bibliographical tool remains unrealised.

K. R. M. SHORT