

# FRANCES BEVAN: TRANSLATOR OF GERMAN HYMNS

(Concluded)

by JOHN S. ANDREWS

v.

Most of Mrs. Bevan's translations were of writers belonging to none of the periods so far discussed but to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The Pietists of that time reacted against the scholasticism and formalism of the contemporary Lutheran Church in favour of a personal, experimental piety. Out of what Wilhelm Nelle called the "spring-time" of pietism<sup>30</sup> she translated hymns by Laurentius Laurenti (1660-1722), the musical director of Bremen Cathedral,<sup>31</sup> by Gottfried Arnold (1660-1772), the author of an epoch-making Church history,<sup>32</sup> and by Justus Falckner (1672-?1723), the first Lutheran clergyman to be ordained in America.<sup>33</sup>

A practical outcome of the Pietistic Movement was the establishment of an orphanage at Halle by A. H. Francke (1663-1727). C. F. Richter (1676-1711), a physician and co-worker in the Orphanage, wrote thirty-three hymns. His finest hymn, *Es glänzet der Christern inwendiges Leben*, was translated by Mrs. Bevan. It began as follows:

All fair within those Children of the light,  
Though dark their brows beneath the desert sun;  
Mysterious joys, far hidden from all sight,  
The King of Glory giveth to each one . . .<sup>34</sup>

She gave us the only English version of Richter's *O wie selig sind die Seelen* (*O what joy for them is stored*).<sup>35</sup> J. A. Freylinghausen (1670-1739), the son-in-law and successor of Francke as director of the Orphanage, published the standard hymnal of the Pietist

<sup>30</sup> *Geschichte des deutschen evangelischen Kirchenliedes* (3 Aufl., 1928), p. 186.

<sup>31</sup> She translated his *Ermuntert euch, ihr Frommen* as *Awaken, O chosen and faithful* (*Songs of EL*, p. 30).

<sup>32</sup> *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* (1699-1700). Mrs. Bevan translated only one of his hymns, *O Durchbrecher aller Bände* (*Thou who breakest every fetter* in *Songs of EL*, p. 51).

<sup>33</sup> She translated his *Auf! ihr Christen, Christi Glieder* as *Rise, ye children of salvation* (*Songs of EL*, p. 10).

<sup>34</sup> *Hymns of TS II*, 89.

<sup>35</sup> *Songs of EL*, p. 68.

School, to which he contributed many hymns. One of them, *Der Tag ist hin*, was translated by Mrs. Bevan.<sup>36</sup>

Minor Pietist hymnodists translated by her were J. J. Wickler (1670-1722),<sup>37</sup> J. L. C. Allendorf (1693-1773),<sup>38</sup> and J. S. Kunth (1700-79).<sup>39</sup>

The best known of several current versions of *Ich habe nun den Grund gefunden* by the Pietist J. A. Rothe (1688-1758) was by John Wesley, *Now I have found the ground wherein*. Mrs. Bevan's version lacked his fire, but was competently executed. Her first stanza ran:

My soul hath found the steadfast ground,  
 There ever shall my anchor hold —  
 That ground is in my Saviour Christ,  
 Before the world was from of old —  
 And that sure ground shall be my stay,  
 When Heaven and Earth shall pass away.<sup>40</sup>

Rothe was closely linked with the Moravian community at Herrnhut, although he always remained a Lutheran. Superficially it seemed strange that Mrs. Bevan translated nothing by the leader of the Moravians, the Graf Nicolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-60). The keynote of all his writing was a deep personal devotion to the crucified Saviour, a devotion that she shared. The fact that others, notably John Wesley, had reproduced some of his best work partly accounted for her neglect of him. The irreverent sentimentalism that disfigured much of his work was probably a more cogent reason.

The most popular, though not the most characteristic, of all her translations from the German, was that from Erdmann Neumeister's *Jesus nimmt die Sünder an* (*Sinners Jesus will receive*).<sup>41</sup> Although the High Lutheran Neumeister (1671-1756) was a leading opponent of Pietism, this hymn was in no sense inferior to the most fervent products of that Movement. Owing to Mrs. Bevan's liking for anonymity she was not always credited with the authorship of the translation. It was included in a number of modern collections,

<sup>36</sup> *The day is gone; my soul looks on* (*Songs of EL*, p. 48; *Hymns of TS II*, 107).

<sup>37</sup> *Meine Seele senket sich* (*Wearily my spirit sinketh in Songs of EL*, p. 65 and *Hymns of TS II*, 111).

<sup>38</sup> *Die Seele ruht in Jesus Armen* (*In Jesus' arms her soul doth rest in Songs of EL*, p. 42) and *Unter Lilien jener Freuden* (*Glorious are the fields of heaven in Songs of Praise for CP*, p. 131). According to Julian, Mrs. Bevan's translation of the latter hymn is the only one available.

<sup>39</sup> *Es ist noch eine Ruh vorhanden* (*There is a day of rest before thee in Songs of EL*, p. 3 and *Hymns of TS II*, 76).

<sup>40</sup> *Songs of EL*, p. 55; and *Hymns of TS II*, 109.

<sup>41</sup> *Songs of EL*, p. 23; and *Hymns of TS II*, 87.

often with a superfluous four-line refrain not present in the original German nor in the original English version; this refrain was possibly composed by D. W. Whittle ("El Nathan"), when he arranged the hymn for Sankey's *Sacred Songs and Solos*. Mrs. Bevan's original kept only the single-line refrain at the end of each six-line stanza, "Christ receiveth sinful men" (for "Jesus nimmt die Sünder an"). The tune, composed by Whittle's co-worker, James McGranahan, for Sankey, is the tune to which the hymn is nearly always sung.<sup>42</sup> The translator rendered (fairly faithfully) seven out of Neumeister's eight six-line stanzas; it is rare to see more than four stanzas in modern collections.<sup>43</sup>

## VI.

In the seventeenth century the German Reformed Church, relaxing its previously exclusive use of the Psalter, began to produce hymns, many of which were equal to the best Lutheran ones. Two of the most important German Reformed hymnodists of all time were F. A. Lampe (1683-1719), Professor of Theology at Utrecht, and Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1769), a ribbon-weaver, an ascetic, an evangelist, and a deeply pious mystic. Mrs. Bevan translated only one hymn by Lampe (namely, *O Liebesglut, wie soll ich dich*),<sup>44</sup> but about fifty by Tersteegen, a far greater writer. Whereas she was not the first to translate him (John Wesley and Catherine Winkworth were notable forerunners), few could have translated so much from him.

After short periods as a merchant's apprentice and as a linen-weaver, Tersteegen took up the trade of a ribbon-weaver. During the years 1719-24 he passed through a time of spiritual depression, at the end of which he gained assurance of faith in Christ. He then wrote the hymn, *Wie bist du mir so innig gut*, which Mrs. Bevan rendered as *To heart and soul how sweet Thou art*:

<sup>42</sup> See Cornwall, pp. 54-5.

<sup>43</sup> Each of the following collections contained only four stanzas: *Hymns of Christian Worship* (1909); *Golden Bells* (1925); *Methodist Hymn-Book* (1933); *Presbyterian Church Hymnary* (Revised edn., 1927); *Christian Praise* (1957); and *Baptist Church Hymnal* (Revised edn., 1933). The first three collections adopted Sankey's free arrangement of four-line stanzas (plus the four-line refrain) of Mrs. Bevan's st. 1, 3, 6, and 7. The next two collections closely respected Mrs. Bevan's text of st. 1, 2, 4, and 7. The *Baptist Church Hymnal* closely respected the text of st. 1, 4, 5, and 7, except for the needless alteration of the first line to read, "Jesus sinners will receive"; this followed the practice of earlier Baptist collections (see Julian, *ad loc.*).

<sup>44</sup> *O Fire of Love, what earthly words* (*Songs of EL*, p. 61).

To heart and soul how sweet Thou art,  
 O great High Priest of God!  
 My heart brought nigh to God's own heart  
 By Thy most precious blood . . .<sup>45</sup>

In 1724 he prepared a covenant with God and signed it in his own blood. Even before this he had ceased to attend Communion services in the Reformed Church because he refused to communicate with open sinners. From 1725 he took an active part in prayer and other meetings in private houses. Three years later he gave up his trade to devote himself to the translation of books by Mystics, to the composition of original devotional books, and to his work as a spiritual leader of the *Stillen im Lande*, as the frequenters of his "conventicles" were called. Although he remained outside the Reformed Church, he never established a sect of his own.

In him Mrs. Bevan found a spiritual kinsman. His meetings in private houses were similar to those organized in the early nineteenth century by the founders of the Plymouth Brethren, with which movement she was associated. The Brethren, likewise, revolted against the laxity then prevailing among Nonconformists with regard to Holy Communion. The separatist tendencies, however, among certain of the Brethren culminated in the formation of what was tantamount to a new sect, which did not happen in the case of Tersteegen's activities. He translated the Mystics, as did Mrs. Bevan in her day. His personal devotion to the Lord was matched by hers, although she would have been too well bred to prepare a covenant such as his.

In Germany the most popular of his many hymns was *Gott ist gegenwärtig*, known to Englishmen through John Wesley's paraphrase, *Lo, God is here! Let us adore*. Mrs. Bevan's version could not equal his; but she did capture something of the original's spirit of reverent adoration:

God is present with us—let us fall and worship,  
 Holy is the place;  
 God is in the midst, our souls are silent,  
 Bowed before His Face.  
 Lord, we kneel before Thee,  
 Awed by love Divine,  
 We of Thee unworthy  
 Own that we are Thine . . .<sup>46</sup>

According to Julian, Mrs. Bevan's best known translations during her lifetime were those of Tersteegen's *O Gott! O Geist! O Licht des Lebens* and *Jedes Herz will etwas lieben*. Neither of

<sup>45</sup> *Hymns of TS I*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> *Hymns of TS I*, 45.

these translations is commonly sung today. The former, *O God, O Spirit, Light of Life*,<sup>47</sup> much altered by B. H. Kennedy and beginning, *Spirit of Grace, Thou Light of Life*, appeared in the 1927 Presbyterian *Church Hymnary* and (ironically enough for someone of Mrs. Bevan's convictions) in the Unitarian *Hymns of Worship* of that same year. The second, *Something every heart is loving*,<sup>48</sup> appeared in *Golden Bells* (1925) and the *Keswick Hymn-Book* (1938).

Many German hymns were too long for English tastes, and Tersteegen's were no exception. The longest hymn translated by Mrs. Bevan was his *Golden Timepiece*, which dealt "hour by hour" with the Passion and the Crucifixion. Her version consisted of twenty-four stanzas.<sup>49</sup> The length of many of the other hymns also, even as abridged by the translator, makes adequate quotation here impracticable.

Here are the opening and closing stanzas of one such hymn (it is a version of *Setze dich, mein Geist, ein wenig*):

Still, O soul! the sign and wonder  
Of all ages see —  
Christ, thy God, the King of glory,  
On the Cross for thee;  
From the Father's bosom come,  
Wandering soul, to bring thee home.

Unto me, the base, the guilty,  
Flows that living flood;  
I, Thine enemy, am ransomed  
By Thy precious Blood.  
Silent at Thy feet I lie,  
Lost in love's immensity.<sup>50</sup>

The last line recalled similar quietist expressions in two other translations from Tersteegen, one that contained the lines,

Yearning of His heart to thee,  
Fills the deep immensity<sup>51</sup>

and the other,

There to forget myself for evermore;  
Lost, swallowed up in Love's immensity.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, some of the translations were short lyrics rather than hymns, for example:

Thou sayest, "Fit me, fashion me for Thee."  
Stretch forth thine empty hands, and be thou still;

<sup>47</sup> *Songs of EL*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Songs of EL*, p. 58.

<sup>49</sup> *Hymns of TS II*, 54.

<sup>50</sup> *Hymns of TS I*, 25.

<sup>51</sup> *Wanderer, rest thy weary feet (Hymns of TS I, 40).*

<sup>52</sup> *O past and gone! (Hymns of TS I, 34).*

O restless soul, thou dost but hinder Me  
 By valiant purpose and by steadfast will.  
 Behold the summer flowers beneath the sun,  
 In stillness his great glory they behold;  
 And sweetly thus his mighty work is done,  
 And resting in his gladness they unfold.  
 So are the sweetness and the joy divine  
 Thine, O beloved, and the work is Mine.<sup>53</sup>

These lines, based on Philippians 2: 13, were infused with the same quietism summed up in the first line of another poem, *Let Him lead thee blindfold onwards*.<sup>54</sup>

In his excellent short account of German Hymnody S. H. Moore quoted one of the finest of Mrs. Bevan's versions of Tersteegen, although without giving the name of the translator:

Hath not each heart a passion and a dream?  
 Each some companionship for ever sweet?  
 And each in saddest skies some silver gleam,  
 And each some passing joy, too fair and fleet?  
 And each a staff and stay, though frail it prove,  
 And each a face he fain would ever see?  
 And what have I? An endless Heaven of love,  
 A rapture, and a glory, and a calm;  
 A life that is an everlasting Psalm,  
 All, O Beloved, in Thee.<sup>55</sup>

Mrs. Bevan translated also a few of those short poems by Tersteegen that are more in the nature of aphorisms than of hymns. One of them runs as follows:

"Where is a God?" doth weary Reason say —  
 "I see but starlit skies."  
 "Where is the sun?" So calleth at noonday  
 The man with sightless eyes.  
 Thou, little child, from thee God is not far;  
 Look inwards, not above:  
 Thou needest not to roam from star to star,  
 For God is Love.<sup>56</sup>

## VII.

Mrs. Bevan's translations from writers later than Tersteegen were few in number and not particularly impressive.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Age of the *Aufklärung*, she found little to attract her. Hers is the only Eng-

<sup>53</sup> *Hymns of TS I*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> *Hymns of TS I*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> *Hymns of TS I*, 18. Quoted in Moore's *Sursum Corda* (1956), p. 101. In a personal communication Mr. Moore informed me that he had been unable to trace the name of the translator, but had used Oliphant as his source (see Oliphant, p. 154).

<sup>56</sup> *Hymns of TS I*, 35. Oliphant included it among several of Mrs. Bevan's translations from Tersteegen (Oliphant, pp. 177-83).

lish version of C. F. Gellert's *Zu Gott im Himmel beten* (*O how sweet it is to pray*);<sup>57</sup> but no one would claim the German original as a typical product of its time. Nor would one claim that its author was. Gellert (1715-69), known to us for his hymn translated by F. E. Cox as *Jesus lives! no longer now*, was deeply pious, unlike many of his contemporaries. His best hymns were full of earnestness and pathos.

The early part of the nineteenth century in Germany saw a revival of orthodox Protestant hymnody. Mrs. Bevan translated only one hymn by K. J. P. Spitta (1801-59), the most popular German hymnodist of the time, and that was not one of his best compositions.<sup>58</sup> She no doubt felt that she could not better Richard Massie's excellent versions in his *Lyra Domestica*.<sup>59</sup>

Among the minor writers of the period whom she translated were C. G. Barth (1799-1862),<sup>60</sup> J. W. Hey (1789-1854),<sup>61</sup> and Luise Hensel (1798-1876).<sup>62</sup>

#### VIII.

In the last of the quotations above from Tersteegen ("*Where is a God?*" *doth weary Reason say*) the consciousness that God is Love and that He is visible only to the eye of childlike faith was combined with the injunction to look inwards rather than upwards. Similar ideas inspired also many of Mrs. Bevan's translations from writers other than Tersteegen. Her poems were steeped in the language of the Canticles ("I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine") and of the Pauline "unio mystica" (the *present* enjoyment of a life "hid with Christ in God"). Words like "glory", "rest", "sweetness", "precious", "stillness" recurred repeatedly.

The result could be cloying and unhealthy, especially as Mrs.

<sup>57</sup> *Songs of praise for CP*, p. 148. Gellert's hymn originally began *Dein Heil, O Christ! nicht zu verscherzen*. Mrs. Bevan translated from a later version (see Julian, *ad loc.*).

<sup>58</sup> *Wie wird uns sein, wenn endlich*, rendered as *O what will be the day, when won at last* in *Songs of EL*, p. 71 and *Hymns of TS II*, 113. In *Hymns of TS* the date of composition was wrongly stated to be "1800"; Spitta was not born until 1801.

<sup>59</sup> 1st series, 1860; 2nd series, 1864.

<sup>60</sup> *Auf einem Berg ein Bäumlein stand*, rendered as *A tree grows on a mountain* (*Songs of Praise for CP*, p. 138).

<sup>61</sup> Two children's hymns, *Aus dem Himmel ferne* and *Weiss du wie viel Sternlein stehen*, rendered as *From the glorious heaven* and *How many stars are shining* (*Songs of Praise for CP*, pp. 139 and 144).

<sup>62</sup> *Immer muss ich wieder lesen und Müde bin ich, geh' zur Ruh*, rendered as *O how sweet the wondrous story and Now I close my tired eyes* (*Songs of Praise for CP*, pp. 142 and 147).

Bevan was too prolific a writer to maintain a consistently high standard. Unlike the hymns by the Wesley brothers (both of whom owed much to German Pietism), only a few of hers were concerned with the objective facts of the Christian faith; most were concerned only with the Christian's enjoyment of that faith. There were few evangelistic and few sacramental hymns; most were introspective ones of consecration. They fostered the dangers of quietism: passivity and abandonment of the will. The problem inseparable from all hymn-singing, that of giving voice to "unfelt truth", became even more acute in the case of such hymns as these.

Rightly used, however, for devotional meditation they were an effective means of grace. Some were suitable for occasional use in church worship and found their way into various collections.

They did not become better known for several reasons. First, the already-mentioned subjective nature of most of them unfitted them for extensive congregational use. Secondly, many of them were long and not easily abridged. Thirdly, the original collections in which some of them appeared were too large and costly for the average churchgoer. Finally, they were reprinted usually in hymnals with only a limited circulation, such as those current among the Plymouth Brethren. These four reasons are cogent, but regrettable, for they mean that Christians as a whole have remained ignorant of some of the rich resources of German hymnody which Mrs. Bevan sought to make accessible to them.

As Julian pointed out, the Brethren movement produced, especially in its early days, a number of fine hymns.<sup>63</sup> The ethos of the weekly "Breaking of Bread" meeting (a distinctive type of Communion service) might be one of the reasons for this.<sup>64</sup> The best hymns of the movement combined objective truth with fervent piety. Among Brethren hymns those by Mrs. Bevan, sometimes lacking in clear-cut doctrine, were unique for their mystical qualities. The theme of the heavenly exaltation of Christians in Christ ennobled many Brethren hymns, but not to the extent that it did hers. What she wrote of the medieval Mystics held true of her own work: they were filled with the "joy of Heaven, Christ in glory, known and rejoiced in whilst here below".<sup>65</sup> The estimate of W. Blair

<sup>63</sup> Julian, s. v. "Plymouth Brethren Hymnody". For the period since 1889 see the present writer's article in the *QUARTERLY*, xxviii (1956), 208-28.

<sup>64</sup> For a recent account (by a High Anglican) of a Brethren Communion service see the Rev. R. C. Walls's article in *Theology*, lx (1957), 265-6. He describes an Exclusive Brethren service; the Open Brethren service is less "liturgical" and differs in certain other respects.

<sup>65</sup> *Hymns of TS II*, Preface.

Neatby, the not uncritical historian of the movement, was of value. After discussing the "mysticism" of J. N. Darby, a prominent leader, Neatby concluded:

Another mystic, Mrs. Frances Bevan, found in Darbyism that which met her wants and detached her from the Church of England, notwithstanding the strength of the ties that bound her to it. Turning . . . to the study of the German mystics, she produced from their writings, in a series of fascinating volumes, a catena of quotations in which the Darbyite is startled by the clearness and intensity of the echo of tones that have become familiar to his ear in such different surroundings."

Mrs. Bevan was not strictly a "Darbyite"; she belonged to the "Open" section of the Brethren, who repudiated Darby's leadership. Neatby erred in treating "Open" Brethrenism as merely "incomplete Darbyism",<sup>67</sup> there being significant differences between the two sections. With that proviso his words may stand as a fair assessment of Mrs. Bevan's achievement as a translator of German hymns.

*Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.*

<sup>66</sup> *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (1901), p. 333.

<sup>67</sup> *History*, p. 325.