An Introduction to The Yattendon Hymnal

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Among the cluster of historically-oriented British hymnals that appeared during the decades on either side of the turning of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, one of the most influential collections was the volume presented here in digitized form, The Yattendon Hymnal [YH] of 1899. Because its primary creator, Robert Bridges (1844-1930) was the British Poet Laureate during the last seventeen years of his life, and because he either wrote or adapted 44 of the 100 hymn texts in YH (several of which continue to enjoy wide use), it would seem natural to assume that his primary motive in producing it was to assemble a selection of significant and exemplary texts. But a careful review of the circumstances surrounding its creation reveals that there was actually a very different purpose at work. As Alan Dunstan noted in 1982, “Bridges, the future Poet Laureate, was much more interested in the music than the words of hymnody.”

To appreciate the accuracy of this assessment, it is important to know that Bridges came to this project from his years of serving as the Precentor (music leader) of the small parish church in Yattendon in Oxfordshire, where he labored diligently to evoke beautiful sounds from his rustic choristers. As he states in the first sentence of the “Preface to the Notes” of the music edition of this hymnal, “The origin of this book was my attempt, when precentor of a village choir, to provide better settings of the hymns than those in use. When I gave up my office, I printed the first twenty-five hymns for the convenience of the choir.” His claim that he was simply trying to improve on the tunes provided in the predominant hymnal of the day, Hymns Ancient & Modern [HA&M], is borne out by the fact that 21 of the 25 hymns in the first installment carry a notice of where they may be found in the then-current edition of that hymnal. Two of the remaining four texts are paraphrases Bridges created in order to provide words for specific tunes. These proportions for the textual sources are not maintained in the subsequent three installments in which the contents of YH originally appeared. As Bridges notes in that same preface, “by the time that these first tunes were printed, I determined to continue the book free of this restriction [to provide new tunes for HA&M], and, from whatever source to provide words for tunes which I had hitherto been unable to use.” In other words, the texts that Bridges created for YH, which have in turn been perpetuated by their inclusion in later hymnals, were not his primary concern. Both in the first quarter of the collection, where the goal was to supply better tunes for HA&M texts, and in the later three installments, where exemplary tunes were selected first and words found for them, the motivating center of YH remains the tunes rather than the texts.

Further support for the primacy of music in Bridges’ understanding of this undertaking can be found in the general preface to the collection and the table of musical sources that appear before the first hymn. The preface opens with an explicit reference to “the old melodies which it is the chief object of this book to restore to use,” and these introductory remarks are followed by a “Synopsis of the Music in Order of Date” (YH v-vi), beginning with three classes of “Plain-song Melodies” and concluding with “Seven new tunes by H[arry] E[llis] W[ooldridge]” (1845-1917), Bridges’ principal collaborator in this project. But what
becomes immediately noticeable in this catalog of sources is the absence of any composer between J. S. Bach (1685-1750) and Wooldridge. The implicit critique of the popular Victorian tunesmiths would not have been lost on anyone who perused this list.

Bridges’ dissatisfaction with the tunes composed by Victorian composers can also be discerned in the way he offered alternative tunes for those provided in *HA&M*. In the very first item in *YH*, for example, he deals a blow to several deficiencies he finds in that volume. By printing both the *HA&M* adaptation of Edward Caswall’s translation of the Stabat Mater and W.J. Iron’s translation of the Dies Irae to a setting by the 17th-century Italian composer Giovanni Maria Nanini (1540-1607), Bridges proffers one approved setting for a total of five settings in *HA&M*. It is surely no accident that two of the rejected tunes are by John Bacchus Dykes (1823-1876), one of the favorite *HA&M* composers, two are harmonized plainsong adaptations of the sort Bridges disliked, and one is a foursquare setting of the tune from *Mainztich Gesangbuch* (1661). A comparable rejection of Victorian composers continues through the first installment as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>YH</em> (number) composer</th>
<th><em>HA&amp;M</em> (number) composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2) Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-1585)</td>
<td>(106) John Stainer (1840-1901)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Jeremiah Clarke (1670-1707)</td>
<td>(243) John Richardson (1816-1879)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Jeremiah Clarke</td>
<td>(178) John Bacchus Dykes Richard Redhead (1820-1901)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Jeremiah Clarke</td>
<td>(77) John Hopkins (1822-1900)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) DUNDEE, arr. H. E. Wooldridge</td>
<td>(299) Henry Lahee (1826-1912)</td>
</tr>
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<td>(11) H. E. Wooldridge</td>
<td>(266) John Bacchus Dykes</td>
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<tr>
<td>(17) H. E. Wooldridge</td>
<td>(257) John Bacchus Dykes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18) H. E. Wooldridge</td>
<td>(60) Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847)</td>
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In addition to the commentary Bridges provides in the copious notes appended to the music edition of *YH*, he has left a valuable exposition of his views in his essay “A Practical Discourse on Some Principles of Hymn Singing.” Published in the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Theological Studies* (1899) shortly before the complete version of *YH* appeared, this essay provides much insight into his editorial choices. Beginning with extensive quotations demonstrating the importance of music in the religious experience of St. Augustine, Bridges then reveals why he has devoted so much attention to this historical situation:

These is something very strange and surprising in this state of things, this contrast between the primitive Church with its few simple melodies that ravished the educated hearer, and our own full-blown institution with its hymn-book of some 600 tunes, which when it is opened fills the sensitive worshipper with dismay, so that there are persons who would rather not go inside a church than subject themselves to the trial.

[42/6/26]
Here again the emphasis is on the music of hymns rather than their words. Bridges sets the “few simple melodies” of the primitive church against the “hymn-book of some 600 tunes” of the church in his own day. This implicit emphasis is made explicit when Bridges continues: “Assuming that the chief blame lies with the music (as, I think, might easily be proved), I propose to discuss the question of the music of our hymnody” [42-43/6/26]. To this end he identifies four principles for which he claims St. Augustiné’s authority and sets them off in italics: “The music must express the words or sense: it should not attract too much attention to itself: it should be dignified: and its reason and use is to heighten religious emotion” [43/6/27]. At another point in this essay Bridges waxes almost lyrical in praising the “simple free rhythms” in hymn tunes:

A hymn-tune, which [hymn-book compilers] hastily assume to be the commonest and lowest form of music, actually possesses liberties coveted by other music. It is a short melody, committed to memory, and frequently repeated: there is no reason why it should submit to any of the time-conveniences of orchestral music: there is no reason why its rhythm should not be completely free; nor is there any a priori necessity why any one tune should be exactly like another in rhythm. It will be learned by the ear (most often in childhood), be known and loved for its own sake, and blended in the heart with the words which interpret it: and this advantage was instinctively felt by those of our early church composers who, already understanding something of the value of barred music, yet deliberately avoided cramping the rhythms of their hymn-tunes by too great a subservience to it. One of the first duties therefore which we owe to hymn-melodies is the restoration of their free and original rhythms, keeping them as varied as possible. [53-54/26-27/47-48]

Bridges sums up this section by saying that “the best of these simpler Plain-song tunes are very fit for congregational use [and] should be offered as pure melody in free rhythm and sung in unison” [54/27-28/49]. These lofty pronouncements sound so passionate that it is surprising to find that they are not actually followed in the music edition of YH. Although the plainsong melodies of seven of the nine Sarum Use tunes are handsomely presented with the Latin text on four-line staves printed in red (a detail unfortunately lost in this black-and-white digitized version, e.g. at no. 29 Continued), the remaining six plainsong tunes (two Sarum Use, two Ambrosian, and two “later plain-song”) are offered only in the four-voice versions given for the English texts of all the plainsong tunes. In the “Preface to Notes” Bridges accepts responsibility for this “novelty” (as he calls it) and attempts to explain his rationale for including it. Reduced to its simplest terms, his argument seems to be that the plainsong melodies will inevitably be accompanied in some way, so it is better for them to be presented in a four-part vocal arrangement in the manner of Palestrina than in a unison version with organ accompaniment. (Yet he concedes that these modal settings can be “a guide to the accompanist” if that is preferred.) Despite Bridges’ laudatory remarks about melody and unison singing in his essay and the YH notes, the possibility of unaccompanied unison singing seems completely out of the question. He even goes so far as to say: “it is my opinion that such settings as I offer will really please, and they may do something to bring these tunes, which have a unique, unmatchable beauty, into favour with choirs that dislike the effort and waste of unison singing” [YH Appendix, p. 5]. It is, at the very least, disappointing that an announced advocate of “dignified melody” would allow that concluding sentiment to stand without challenge. It is also regrettable that Bridges did not offer the plainsong hymns
in versions where unison stanzas could alternate with fauxbourdon settings that assigned the melody to the tenor voices rather than to treble voices. That eleven of the thirteen plainsong melodies were set by his wife, Mary Monica Waterhouse Bridges (1863-1949), ix may also have influenced his adoption of this approach. In any case, his advocacy of plainsong melody seems to have been compromised by the way such tunes are presented in YH.

Nor do the notes provided in the appendix of YH offer much compensation for this silence. Almost without exception, the notes on musical matters are more extensive than those on textual matters. The latter are nearly always confined to data regarding the sources of texts, often a first stanza in Latin or German. It is therefore intriguing to find an evaluative note on the text of hymn no. 70, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” by Isaac Watts (1674-1748): “This hymn stands out at the head of the few English [sic] hymns which can be said to compare with the best old Latin hymns of the same measure. Its true grandeur has been almost obscured by an unfortunate musical association [with the tune ROCKINGHAM]. The severity of Bourgeois’ tune [GENEVA 131] should suit it well.” Occasionally he also reveals something of his editorial principles, as in the note on the text of the evening hymn by John Keble (1792-1866) at no. 85: “Selections from this hymn commonly omit the first two stanzas: which is regrettable, not only on account of their natural beauty, but because they make the force of what follows.” It is also fascinating to read Bridges’ comments on the famous editorial crux in the second stanza of “O Thou Who Camest from Above” by Charles Wesley (1707-1788):

This fine hymn has been kept out of use by the second line of the second stanza, with inextinguishable blaze. …This cannot be sung: in altering it [to “with ever-bright, undying blaze”] I have departed from the original as little as possible. …The objection to such along word is not exactly that ‘a whole congregation is poised on it,’ but that the accents of a melody have too much meaning to allow of such a distribution over one word, the parts of which are not in English [sic] of sufficient importance, so that the expression of the musical phrase is ridiculously abundant. (YH App. 24)

There is also a most interesting discussion, very much worth reading, in the textual notes for hymn no. 98 (YH App. 26), setting out the complicated metrical possibilities of the original text by Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504-1575), for which Tallis composed his Fifth Tune.

The perspective provided by “A Practical Discourse on Some Principles of Hymn Singing” allows us to regard YH with a greater appreciation of what Bridges hoped to accomplish in this hymnal, but it also leaves some significant questions unanswered. The sheer size and elegance of the music edition, x for example, suggests that the primary focus of all this effort was really the choir. After all they are the only ones furnished with music, and the congregation gets nothing but The Small Hymn-Book: The Word-Book of the Yattendon Hymnal. For those of us accustomed to the North American practice of providing full music hymnals to congregations, offering anything less strikes us as a discouragement to participation. But it is important here to recall that Bridges (like Vaughan Williams in the English Hymnalxi) expects the congregation to sing in unison, and to sing the melody they hear from the choir. In other words, the two editions of YH are intended to be complementary rather than competitive; it is a matter of both/and rather than either/or. (His
scheme of things really doesn’t include a choir-less gathering for worship.) Also, Bridges’ method relies on the ear rather than the eye to serve as the means of acquainting the congregation with the tune. Such an approach is integral to his emphasis on the music rather than the text being the primary consideration.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Bridges devoted considerable effort to the selection and creation of texts that would be effective expressions of the music he was eager to promulgate. Is there any evidence to support his claim that the music shaped his verses? One way to answer that question is to note how different his hymns are from his other poetry. For one thing, the careful stress and syllable considerations of hymnic verse are really not Bridges’ métier. Like his longtime friend, Gerald Manley Hopkins (whose poetry he was responsible for preserving and publishing), Bridges worked primarily in accentual verse measured by stresses per line rather than regular metrical feet per line. Brewster Ghiselen has summarized this matter as follows:

The nature of this accentual verse has been pretty fully expounded, most notably by Gerard Manley Hopkins in explanation of his system of accentual scansion (“sprung rhythm”) and by Robert Bridges in his discussions of “the new prosody,” which he derived from Hopkins. These authorities agree at least as to the fundamentals of modern accentual verse: each foot contains a single accented syllable, commonly bearing a natural speech stress, and this syllable may either stand alone and constitute the complete foot, or it may be accompanied by unaccented syllables in any number and in any position about the stress, before or after it or in both places, except that the stress must not carry on either side of it so many or so heavy syllables that it will be overburdened.xii

Clearly, such a variable and fluid approach to creating poetry is not compatible with the regularity of a strophic musical setting. So the first thing to keep in mind about Bridges’ texts in $YH$ is that he is intentionally working in a style different from that of the poetry he created without these constrains. That fact alone is highly significant in evaluating his hymnic verse.

To take a well-known and multifaceted example, Bridges’ “Ah, Holy Jesu” [$YH$ 42] provides a means of vocalizing the chorale HERZLIEBSTER JESU of Johann Crüger (1598-1662). This tune is tightly structured into three eleven-note lines and one five-note line.xiii Each eleven-note line consists of two patterns: long-short-short-long-long and four shorts followed by two longs. (In the technical language of prosody, the break between the first and second parts is called a caesura.) The final five-note line has the same pattern as the first part of the eleven-note lines. Furthermore, it should be noted that each of the two patterns constructing each stanza is a metrically closed unit rather than an open one. In other words, no syllables can extend forward or backward from each closed unit. The strictness of this metrical pattern is reinforced by the melody, which contains no melisma. This is a formidably inexorable pattern in which to construct an emotive text reflecting on the meaning of the Crucifixion.

Bridges maintains in his notes on this text that he was working from his own retranslation of the Latin original (now attributed to Jean de Fécamp [d.1078] rather than to St. Anselm, as Bridges thought) as well as the German version by Johann Heermann (1585-1647). Although the $YH$ version is only freely related to either of these previous texts, a few similarities are
immediately evident. One is the retention of Heermann’s “Jesu” on the pair of long notes closing the first unit of the opening line. (Note that this word recurs in the same position in stanzas four and five and on the same falling minor third in the first part of the third line of stanza two.) Bridges’ text also follows both the Latin and German texts in beginning with a series of questions. Furthermore, even if he is working from the meaning of the Latin text, the music locks him into the stress patterns of the German text, especially the unstressed final syllable of each five- or six-syllable unit. This is an especially challenging feat to carry off on this somber subject, because the customary use of unstressed endings in English is for comic verse.

Part of the measure of Bridges’ success in this text is the extent to which the metrical complexities are obscured in a manner that is simultaneously intensely felt yet highly singable. The initial interjection “Ah,” for example, both fills out its long note and opens the singer’s mouth to prepare for the open “o” of “Holy” that follows, yet prevents a sloppy movement from one vowel to another by the insertion of the comma signaling a slight break/half breath before beginning the second syllable. The masterful use of poetic devices continues throughout the hymn, and an attempt to catalog them all would take many pages. Suffice it here to mention a few virtues: the effective use of alliteration and assonance to suggest connection between the parts of a line and between successive lines, the intensifying use of anaphora in stanza two, the alternation of objective (stanzas one and three) and subjective (stanzas two and four) recollection leading to resolution (stanza five), the careful avoidance of exact rhyme in at least one instance in every other stanza in order to give extra power to the two exact rhymes in the final stanza.

Not all of Bridges’ efforts reach this high level, of course, but this very successful text demonstrates how well he could shape and hone his verse in order to approach his own benchmark of making the music and the words seem inextricable. This is certainly one place where he achieved that goal.

One more question seems essential to ask: did this noble experiment have any effect on hymnody? The answer, happily, is an affirmative one, though the results were not quite what Bridges had envisioned. The musical innovations he proposed, such as the four-part chant settings, never caught on; and many of his proposed tune alternatives, such as OLD 124th for “Abide with me” never displaced the Victorian tunes he despised. On the other hand, his advocacy of composers such as Isaac, Bourgeois, Tallis, Gibbons, and Clarke strengthened their appearances in subsequent hymnals, especially the influential English Hymnal (1906) and its younger sibling Songs of Praise (1925). But, somewhat ironically, Bridges’ texts have been more influential than his musical choices. “Ah, Holy Jesus,” for example, appeared as the translation of “Herzliebster Jesu” in 15 of the 16 hymnals John S. Andrews surveyed in A Study of German Hymns in Current English Hymnals. The same study found “The duteous day now closeth” used for “Nun ruhen alle Wälder” in 14 of 16 hymnals, Bridges’ “O sacred Head” for O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden” in 7 of 28 hymnals, Bridges’ version of “When morning gilds the skies” for “Bei’m frühen Morgenlicht’” in 4 of 23 hymnals, and “All my hope on God is founded” as the only version of “”Meine Hoffnung stehet feste” in 15 hymnals. A more recent North American census by Michael Hawn
found the following occurrences of Bridges’ texts in 40 hymnals published between 1976 and 1996:

Ah, holy Jesus       15  
O gladsome light   11  
O splendor of God’s glory bright 15

Even though the historically-oriented 1904 New Edition of *Hymns Ancient & Modern* was a great failure from the publisher’s point of view, it must have given Bridges more than a little satisfaction to see this attempted reform of the hymnal he had endeavored to improve. It would doubtless have seemed an even greater vindication if he had lived to see his eight texts in *Hymns Ancient & Modern Revised* of 1950 or his eight texts in its latest incarnation *Common Praise* of 2000. Similarly, Bridges’ texts are strongly represented in the hymnal traditions derived from *The English Hymnal* [13] and *Songs of Praise* [19].

It seems fitting to close with the admiring words of Bridges’ near contemporary Percy Dearmer (1867-1936), who called *The Yattendon Hymnal* “both in words and music, easily the most distinguished of individual pioneer contributions to modern hymnody” and said of Bridges’ hymns provide “the advance-guard of a movement which will lead [people] of the future to read hymn books for the poetry that is in them.” And indeed we do.

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iii All three of the articles cited in the previous note mention the importance of Bridges’ experience as precentor at Yattendon: Dunstan, 206; Roberts, 342; Byard, 45-46. Of particular interest is Byard’s quotation of a chorister’s reminiscence: “Mr. Robert Wyatt, a survivor of Bridges’s Yattendon boys, remembers him as an intimidating and forceful personality who inspired emotions sometimes not far from terror in his young flock, often requiring them to attend rehearsals on five nights a week. …Boys were sometimes impressed for the choir at the tender age of 5 or 6. But Bridges ‘got the best out of some raw stuff’, says Mr. Wyatt, who felt that singing in his choir ‘wasn’t hard work, just natural’.” (Byard 45-46). In his “Letter to a Musician on English Prosody” (1909), Bridges himself describes his efforts to improve his choristers’ chanting: “Among my first tasks I had to train the boys in
choral monotone. …I made the organ set the rhythms, and pulling out the great diapason I beat upon it the syllables of the Lord’s Prayer for the boys to pick up. There was of course nothing but boo, boo, boo, only the boos were of different durations: yet the rhythm was so distinct, it was so evident that the organ was saying the Lord’s Prayer, that I was at first rather shockt, and it seemed that I was doing something profane; but it was comic to the boys as well as to me; but the absurdity soon wore off” (as quoted in Byard, 45).

iv The notes on the words and music of YH appear as a separately paginated Appendix in the music edition; this comment appears on YH App. 3. This Preface to the Notes was also reprinted on pp. 50-58 of the 1901 edition of “A Practical Discourse on Some Principles of Hymn Singing,” as described below in note 8.

v The 100 items that eventually formed YH were issued in groups of 25, beginning in 1895. See Table 1 for the contents of those four fascicules.

vi This Preface and Synopsis are also included on pp. 45-49 in the 1901 reprint described in note 8.


viii The Journal of Theological Studies 1:1 (1899): 40-63. Two years later the essay, along with the supplementary materials mentioned above, was reprinted as a 60-page pamphlet by B. H. Blackwell in Oxford and Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, & Co. in London. It has recently been brought out in an undated facsimile edition [ISBN 9781428622371] by Kessinger Publishing. A third edition (without the supplementary material) came with this essay’s inclusion among the music-related items in Collected Essays Papers &c of Robert Bridges XXI-XXVI, ed. M. M. Bridges (London: Oxford University Press/Humphrey Milford, 1935), 17- 66. This third edition perpetuates the modified spellings (“hav” for “have”; “wil” for “will”; etc.) Bridges adopted in the latter part of his life. For ease of reference all three editions are cited hereafter in the form 40/1/17, indicating respectively the pagination of the 1899, 1901, and 1935 editions.

ix She was a very gifted person in her own right. Her father was the noted architect, Alfred Waterhouse (1830-1905), and she grew up in an environment full of attention to the arts. In addition to her musical abilities, she was an advocate of the italic hand, and at Christmas 1898 Oxford University Press published her manual, A New Handwriting for Teachers, which went through several subsequent editions. Sample pages from this book may be seen at http://www.amblesideonline.org/CM/NewHandwriting.html As noted above, she edited the posthumous collected edition of her husband’s essays and papers.
J. R Watson’s description of the significance of the layout and printing of *YH* is comprehensive and incisive: “It was printed …by Horace Hart, Printer to the University of Oxford, in close collaboration with Bridges: Hart was an expert on type-faces, and used the finest ‘Fell’ type-face, on good paper, folio-size, with Fell wood-blocks and other ornaments, and red ink for the leger lines of the plainsong staves. The music was in the music type of Peter Walpergen, the index of music in Fell double Pica italic, the text of the hymns in small Pica roman. The result was a book that was an aesthetic experience to look at and handle, a book which was clearly making a statement over against the simple and serviceable presentation of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*” (*The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], 512). He refers anyone seeking more information about the printing to Stanley Morison, *John Fell, the University Press and the ‘Fell’ Types* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 205ff.

See *EH* xi.


This pattern is the customary hymnic treatment of Latin Sapphic meter, but Bridges is careful to note that it does not observe ‘the quantities of all the syllables of the sapphic line’ (*YH* App. 14).

European University Studies: Ser. 1, German Language and Literature, Vol. 614] (Bern/Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1982). The data cited for the various texts can be found on pp. 366-368.

Although *Songs of Praise* followed the lead of setting Bridges’ words to the MEINE HOFFNUNG tune, this text owes much of its current popularity to Herbert Howells’ tune MICHAEL, written for it in 1930 for use at the Charterhouse School.


These are indicated by AMR and CP in Table 1.
