

December 26, 2021
First Sunday after Christmas

There's a Star in the East (Rise up Shepherd and Follow)

The first known publication of this hymn was text-only, printed in the body of a short story titled *Christmas Gifts*, by Ruth McEnery Stuart in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 1891. In the story, slaves were participating in a Christmas celebration hosted by their Louisiana plantation owner. During an entertaining dance, two of the slaves begin to sing the spiritual, "Rise up, shepherd and follow." The text of the song seems to be a conflation of two stories: the journey of the magi, who follow the star in the east which is found in Matthew's gospel (2:1-12), and the account of the shepherds found in Luke's gospel (2:8-20).

There are few African American Spirituals devoted to Christmas, possibly because enslaved Africans seeking liberation preferred to think of Jesus as a powerful king, as in "Ride on, King Jesus", rather than as a vulnerable infant. This particular spiritual did not start to appear in any denominational hymnals until the 1980s during a revival of the spiritual tradition in the US. Like "Go, Tell It on the Mountain", the focus of this spiritual is about discipleship, rather than on what most Christian Christmas hymns focus on - the adoration of the Christ child.

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly

Many of the European hymns we know were translated from German to English by John Wesley, who was interested in the Moravian hymns, and by Catherine Winkworth. Other European hymns were translated from French, Italian, Spanish, and even a few from Scandinavian countries, but there are almost none from Eastern Europe. This hymn comes from Poland.

Sacred music in Poland dates back to at least the thirteenth century. For some reason, the Catholic church in Poland encouraged the use of the local language, Polish, over Latin. The natural rhythm and prose of the Polish language necessitated changes in the music itself. Most Polish religious songs are written in the style of Polish folk music.

This particular hymn was translated to English by British musician and playwright Edith Margaret Gellibrand Reed. While she found the hymn in a collection dated 1908, the origins of this hymn likely date back to the thirteenth or fourteenth century.

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice

Good Christian Friends, Rejoice is from the medieval carol tradition. It is a macaronic carol, which means that it is in two languages – originally Latin and German. In 19th Century England, a group called the Oxford Movement resurrected many ancient Greek and Latin hymns and translated them for modern use. This one was translated by John Mason Neale.

Most authorities link folk carols, like this one, to folk dance and would have likely been accompanied by folk instruments, including percussion instruments.

Because it was not entirely in Latin, was accompanied by instruments, associated with dance, and because it has a rhythm (as opposed to unmetered plainsong chant) it would not have been used in Roman Catholic liturgy.

Neale included this piece in his 1853 book, *Carols for Christmas-tide*. Apparently the music editor of the book, Thomas Helmore, made a transcription error and included two extra notes. To accommodate the music error, Neale added ‘News, news,’ ‘Joy, joy,’ and ‘Peace, peace.’ The main purpose of the carol is contained in the last line of each stanza: ‘Christ is born today!’ ‘Christ is born for this!’ and ‘Christ is born to save!’

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

This spiritual has become one of a ‘canon’ of spirituals found in almost every hymnal today. It first appeared in a hymnal in *The Pilgrim Hymnal* (1958), edited by Hugh Porter, who was a professor in the Sacred Music department at Union Seminary in New York. It’s roots go back much further.

A group of students at Fisk University in Nashville formed a ten-member singing group called the Fisk Jubilee Singers to go on a fundraising tour in the fall of 1871 to raise funds to save Fisk University from bankruptcy. As their tour went along, their program included more and more spirituals, until they were singing primarily choral arrangements of spirituals. They had been persuaded to sing their spirituals privately for the University’s treasurer, George L. White (who was a white man), and he coerced them to sing them in concert. Up until that time, the ‘slave songs,’ as they were called, were never sung publicly as they were associated with slavery and the dark past and represented things to be forgotten. They were also sacred to their elders who used them in religious worship.

The group has been credited not only with keeping the African American Spiritual alive, but also with saving the university from financial disaster.

In his interpretation of this hymn, African American theologian James H. Cone said that “the conquering King, and the crucified Lord...has come to bring peace and justice to the dispossessed of the land. That is why the slave wanted to ‘go tell it on de mountain.’”

In the Bleak Midwinter

Author Christina Georgiana Rossetti wrote four devotional books, three collections of poetry, two well-known hymns, and you thought I was going to add one something or other, didn't you? The hymns are both Christmas hymns, "Love Came Down at Christmas" and the one we are about to sing, "In the Bleak Midwinter." It was first published as a poem in January 1872, and then, paired with the music of English composer Gustav Holst, it appeared in *The English Hymnal* in 1906.

Rossetti grew up in England, where her father, living in exile, was a professor at King's College in London. From the age of sixteen she had poor health and found solace in writing. The imagery of this hymn is drawn from the experience of a British winter. She is not suggesting that it literally snowed in Bethlehem but uses the imagery as metaphor – God incarnate brought warmth into the most forlorn and dreary of sinful situations.

The second stanza makes the point that the eternal One whom "heaven could not hold" nor "earth sustain" appeared during the bleak winter of human existence where "a stable place sufficed."

The third stanza explores the intimacy of the manger scene, and a fourth stanza, omitted from our hymnary, contrasts the heavenly glory of gathered "angels and archangels....cherubim and seraphim" with the mother who alone "worshipped the beloved with a kiss."

The final stanza draws attention to the social conditions of her day, where women were largely excluded from higher education and professions. Unlike the shepherds, Rossetti had no employment; unlike the wise men, Rossetti held no degree. She has neither lamb nor expensive gift to offer, and offers the only thing she can, the most valuable gift of all, her heart.

The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy

Likely because this African American Spiritual is of West Indian (Caribbean) origin it was not included in historical collections such as the 1867 book *Slave Songs of the United States*. Like all spirituals, this one came from an oral tradition, the tradition of uneducated and/or oppressed people, who expressed their culture primarily through ritual, memory, and symbol. For this reason, there is no known composer for this, or indeed any of the spirituals.

It was first taken down by Edric Connor, a calypso performer and native of Trinidad, in 1942. He heard it sung by then 92 year old James Bryce. Connor's collection of West Indian Spirituals was printed in 1945, and in 1967 the hymn found its way to *The Cambridge Hymnal*. It was first printed in the United States in the Mennonite hymnal in 1992, and is found in *Voices United*, which was printed in 1996.

Spirituals could function as: code or double entendre, social commentary, instruction, or as sermonette. This type of spiritual song propelled liturgical life, and caused that which might have been obscure to become obvious - in this case, the story of Jesus' birth.

While it may seem lacking depth in the areas of music, spirituality or theology, the element of repetition enhances its accessibility and memorization of biblical story, especially for children.

Angels We Have Heard on High

This traditional French carol dates back to the early eighteenth century, and was published in North America in a new hymnal for the Diocese of Quebec in 1819. The hymn was inspired by Luke 2:6-20. The canticle of the angel's song, from which the title comes, is found in Luke 2:14. This is probably one of the most commonly sung Christmas canticle.

Originally this was written with eight stanzas arranged in a dialogue form alternating between the shepherds in stanzas one, three, and six, and the women in stanzas two, four, and seven. Stanzas five and eight were sung in unison.

The carol was translated into English by James Chadwick in about 1862. It is likely it was Chadwick who reduced the carol to its current four stanzas. Like *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*, this too is a macaronic carol because it is in two languages – originally Latin and French.

The carol is an invitation from Christians to non-Christians to join in the celebration of Christ's birth. The first stanza is festive, but the second asks why there is a celebration. The third stanza is an invitation to join the celebration, and the fourth stanza concludes the carol with the observation of Christ's birth and the joyful response of Christians.

Away in a Manger

Although attributed by some to Martin Luther himself (1483-1546), this hymn is wholly American. It is believed that it originated among German Lutherans in Pennsylvania about 1885 – over 300 years after Luther died. It first appeared with only two stanzas in *Little Children's Book for Schools and Families*, a Sunday school collection published in 1885 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The final line of the second stanza, "I love you, Lord Jesus; look down from the sky, and stay by my side until morning is nigh," proposes a comforting concept of Jesus, watching over children. In addition to night being a time when children's imagination can manufacture fears, it was also believed that we are closer to death when we sleep, so we need watching over.

The third stanza first appeared in 1892 in *Gabriel's Vineyard Songs* by Charles Gabriel. This third stanza is in the form of a prayer, petitioning for Jesus' presence and blessing of "all the dear children in your tender care." It ends asking Jesus to "fit us for heaven, to live with you there." Theologically, what this stanza is implying is that we are all Christ's children by baptism, and that our ultimate hope lies not in the present time or place, but in heaven.

While the theology may be suspect, and there are controversies surrounding attribution of the authorship of the hymn, it is still sung with joy and fervour.

What Child Is This

The tune GREENSLEEVES, to which this hymn is set, dates back to at least 1642, where it was paired with the Waits' carol, 'The old year now away is fled.' Shakespeare, in his play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, mentions the tune twice, which helps in dating the tune.

The hymn was written by William C. Dix, who was an Anglican layperson. He spent most of his life as a businessman, working as a manager for the Maritime Insurance Company in Glasgow, Scotland. He wrote a number of hymns, the two most commonly known of which are *What Child Is This*, and the epiphany hymn *As with Gladness Men of Old*.

The second stanza of the carol was originally written:

"Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?
Nails, spear shall pierce him through; The cross he bore for me, for you;
Hail, hail, the Word made flesh, the babe, the Son of Mary!"

One final note of interest is the inclusion, in the third stanza, of the magi, who brought incense, gold, and myrrh, alongside the shepherds. This defies the conventional class structure of the time – the invitation is open to both peasants and kings.