

General Topics :: Isaac Watts (1674-1748) Biography - Pastor, Preacher, Poet, and hymn Writer

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Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was an English pastor, preacher, poet, and hymn writer. Wrote about 600 hymns including When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, Am I a Soldier of the Cross, and Joy to the World. Considered the founder of English hymnody and children's hymnody. He also published several volumes of theological discourses and a book on Logic that was used as a standard text at Harvard, Yale, Cambridge and Oxford for over 100 years.

Isaac Watts

by Robert Southey, abridged by Stephen Ross

Isaac Watts, the eldest of nine children, was born at Southampton, , July 17, 1674, and named after his father, who kept a boarding-school in that town. The persecution which the Church of England had undergone during the Great Rebellion , was then too recent to be forgotten by the nation, or forgiven by the clergy themselves; for toleration is a principle which is seldom learnt by the persecuted, Mr. Watts was a decided non-conformist; and is described as a man of "lively devotion:" he was imprisoned on the score of his religion, and during his confinement, his wife often sat on a stone at the prison-door with this their child, then an infant at her breast.

A book is said to have been the boy's greatest pleasure before he had well learnt to speak; but this can only mean that, like all other children, he was amused by looking at prints, before he could read. His intellect, however, must have been dangerously precocious; for we are told that "he entered upon the study of the learned languages in his fourth year, at the free grammar-school of his native town, under the Rev. John Pinhorne, of whose ability and gentleness, as a schoolmaster, he always retained a grateful and affectionate remembrance." It is related of him that his chief pleasure was in books; that the little money which he received in presents was applied to the gratification of this propensity; that although remarkable for vivacity, he employed his leisure hours in reading instead of joining other boys at play; and that when only seven or eight years old, he composed some devotional verses to please his mother.

Here he made good progress in Latin and Greek, and commenced the study of Hebrew. His promising talents and his amiable disposition induced some generous persons in that vicinity to propose that he should be entered at one of the English Universities, where they would support him; but having been bred up a dissenter, he determined to remain one; a determination to which, what he had heard his mother relate of her sorrows during his own infancy, must no doubt greatly have contributed. In his sixteenth year, therefore, he was sent to an academy in London, kept by Mr. Thomas Rowe, at that time minister of the Independent meeting at Haberdashers' Hall; and three years afterwards he joined in communion with that congregation. Among his fellow-students at this academy were Hort, afterwards Archbishop of Tuam; Say, whose poems and essays were published after his death; and Hughes, the author of the Siege of Damascus. Mr. Rowe said of him, that he never had occasion to reprove him, and that he often held him up as a pattern to his other pupils.

He used to mark all the books he read, to abridge some of them, and annotate others, which were interleaved for that purpose. But he pursued his studies during three years with intemperate ardour, allowing himself no time for needful exercise, and contracting his needful sleep; and his constitution thus received irreparable injury. In 1694, he left the academy, and for the two following years prosecuted his studies at his father's house, during which time the greater part of his hymns were composed, and probably most of his juvenile compositions.

It seems to have been thought remarkable that he did not enter upon the ministry immediately after completing his academical course. One of his biographers says: "The long silence of this excellent and accomplished youth, as to the primary object of all his studies, the preaching of the gospel, affords considerable scope for conjecture. It is true he was but still a youth, diffident of himself, and deeply affected with the importance of the ministry, under a sense of his insufficiency, and trembling lest he should go to the altar of God uncalled. But after sixteen years spent in classical studies, — after uncommon proficiency in other parts of learning connected with the work of the ministry, — with every qualification for the sacred office, — living at a time when his public services were peculiarly needed, and when he was known and spoken of as promising celebrity in whatever profession he might choose, — that with all these advantages he should continue in retirement, is a fact difficult to account for, and for which only his extreme diffidence can afford any apology." When it is remembered that Mr. Watts left the academy in his twentieth year, or soon after its completion, the diffidence which withheld him from hurrying into the pulpit should rather be held forth as an example, than represented as a weakness

or a fault. Nor can there be any difficulty in accounting for it, even to those to whom such diffidence might appear extraordinary. He preached his first sermon on the very day whereon he completed his twenty-fourth year; "probably considering that as the day of a second nativity, by which he entered into a new period of existence;" and in the mean time it is recorded of him, that he "applied himself to the study of the Scriptures, and to the reading of the best commentators, both critical and practical, preparatory to his undertaking taking the pastoral office, to which he was determined to devote his life, and of the importance of which he had a deep sense upon his mind."

Two years before Mr. Watts entered upon the ministry, he was invited by Sir John Hartopp, to reside in his family, at Stoke Newington, as tutor to his son. "I cannot," he says, "but reckon it among the blessings of Heaven, when I review those five years of pleasure and improvement which I spent in his family in my younger part of life. And I found much instruction myself, where I was called to be an instructor." If he had not, as may all but literally be said, sucked in the principle of dissent at his mother's breast, this was a household in which of all others he would have been most likely to imbibe it...

Lady Hartopp "affected retirement to such a degree," that Watts, when he preached her funeral sermon, said, "it would have placed her in a wrong light to have drawn out her virtues at length, and set them to public view." He therefore only interspersed a few hints of her eminent piety, as the text and argument led him into them. Sir John, who survived his lady ten years, and lived to the great age of eighty-five, was a person of sterling worth. He was three times, in Charles the Second's reign, returned to parliament for the county of Leicestershire. By him it was that many of Owen's sermons were preserved, and from him many of the materials for a life of Owen ... were obtained: the sermons he had written down in short hand, according to his constant practice; "by which means," says Dr. Watts, "he often entertained his family in the evening worship, on the Lord's day, with excellent discourses, copied from the lips of some of the greatest preachers of the last age." On his death, Watts preached the only funeral sermon which he ever concluded with a distinct and particular character of the deceased. We are there told, that "though he knew what was due to his quality in this world, yet he affected none of the grandeur of life, but daily practised condescension and love, and secured the respect of all without assuming a superior air; ... his conversation was pious and learned, ingenious and instructive; ... the Book of God was his chief study and his divinest delight. His Bible lay before him night and day; and he was well acquainted with the writers that explained it best ... His doors were ever open, and his carriage always friendly and courteous, to the ministers of the gospel, though they were distinguished among themselves by names of different parties, for he loved all that loved our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity."

In this family Mr. Watts was happily situated and diligently employed; and it was for the use of his pupil that he first drew up those rudiments which, at the repeated importunities of Mr. John Eames, the most learned of his friends, he afterwards enlarged and published, under the title of *Logic, or the Right Use of Reason*...

In 1698, the year of his first appearance in the pulpit, he was chosen assistant to Dr. Isaac Chauncy, pastor of the Independent church, then meeting in Mark Lane; and in January, 1701-2 he accepted the invitation to succeed Dr. Chauncy in the pastoral office. That this acceptance was reluctantly given, and forced from him only by a sense of duty, appears by the terms in which it was expressed:

"Brethren,

"You know the constant aversion I have had to any proposals of a pastoral office, for these three years. You know also that since you have given me an unanimous call thereto, I have proposed several methods for your settlement without me; but your choice and your affections seemed to be still unmoved. I have objected my own indisposition of body; and I have pointed to three divines, members of this church, whose gifts might render them more proper for instructors, and their age for government. These things I have urged till I have provoked you to sorrow and tears, and till I myself have been almost ashamed. But your perseverance in your choice, your constant profession of edification by my ministry, the great probability you show me of building up this famous and decayed church of Christ, and your prevailing fears of its dissolution if I refuse, have given me ground to believe that the voice of this church is the voice of Christ. And to answer this call I have not consulted with flesh and blood; I have laid aside the thoughts of myself to serve the interest of our Lord. I give up my own ease for your spiritual profit and your increase. I submit my inclination to my duty; and in hopes of being made an instrument to build up this ancient church, I return this solemn answer to your call, — That with a great sense of my own inability in mind and body to discharge the duties of so sacred an office, I do, in the strength of Christ, venture upon it; and in His name I accept your call, promising, in the presence of God and his saints, my utmost diligence in all the duties of a pastor, so far as God shall enlighten and strengthen me. And I leave that promise in the hands of Christ our Mediator, to see it performed by me unto you, through the assistance of his grace and Spirit."

Soon after his entrance upon this charge he was seized with a dangerous illness; which, after long confinement and a slow recovery, left him with a constitution so evidently impaired, that the congregation thought an assistant necessary, an

d accordingly, in July, 1703, appointed Mr. Samuel Price to assist him. Gradually, however, he recovered strength, and continued to officiate during some years with no material interruption; another illness then brought him to the brink of the grave; and when the fever was subdued, a nervous debility remained which for some years entirely incapacitated him for the functions of his office. Days were set apart by his congregation for prayers for his recovery, and many of his brethren in the ministry united in these supplications, "as men deeply impressed with the importance of his life." It was necessary, however, that his place should be supplied, even when their prayers were so far answered as to remove any apprehension of a fatal termination; and by his own desire Mr. Price was elected to be joint pastor with him. This illness proved in its consequences the most important and most fortunate event of his life. Sir Thomas Abney invited him to try the effect of change of air, at his house at Theobalds: thither Watts went, intending to stay there but a single week, and there he remained six-and-thirty years, which was as long as he lived.

"Here," says his first biographer, Dr. Gibbons, "he enjoyed the uninterrupted demonstrations of the truest friendship. Here, without any cares of his own, he had every thing which could contribute to the enjoyment of life, and favour the unwearyed pursuits of his studies. Here he dwelt in a family which, for piety, order, harmony, and every virtue, was a house of God. Here he had the privilege of a country recess, the fragrant bower, the spreading lawn, the flowery garden, and other advantages to soothe his mind, and aid his restoration to health; to yield him, whenever he chose them, most grateful intervals from his laborious studies, and enable him to return to them with redoubled vigour and delight. Had it not been for this happy event, he might, as to outward view, have feebly, it may be painfully, dragged on through many more years of languor and inability for public service, and even for profitable study; or perhaps might have sunk into his grave, under the overwhelming load of infirmities, in the midst of his days; and thus the church and the world would have been deprived of those many excellent sermons and works which he drew up and published during his long residence in this family. In a few years after his coming hither, Sir Thomas Abney dies; but his amiable consort survives, who shows the Doctor the same respect and friendship as before: and most happily for him, and great numbers besides ... her thread of life was drawn out to a great age, even beyond that of the Doctor's. And thus this excellent man, through her kindness, and that of her daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Abney, who in a like degree esteemed and honoured him, enjoyed all the benefits and felicities he experienced at his first entrance into this family, till his days were numbered and finished, and, like a shock of corn in its season, he ascended into the regions of perfect and immortal life and joy."

Thus was Mr. Watts adopted into a family which loved him for his personal qualities, admired him for his genius, and revered him for his piety. On their side there was no pride of patronage, on his there was no uneasy feeling of dependence. The bond between them was that of entire confidence and esteem, and their mutual regard was heightened on one part by the delight which they experienced in making him happy, on the other, by a full and grateful sense of their constant kindness. A happier situation for one who had made up his mind to celibacy could not be imagined; and such a determination in his case had, no doubt, been early formed, when he became aware, that by intemperance in his youthful studies his constitution had been irretrievably injured; that his life was rendered in consequence more than ordinarily precarious, and that at best he could never hope to be any thing better than a valetudinarian. He was exempt from all the ordinary cares of life, and enabled at perfect leisure to employ himself in the way which he deemed, as it was really, most useful, and which was most in conformity as well with his own inclinations as with his sense of duty...

Mr. Watts's usefulness among his flock was in no degree diminished by his residence at Theobalds. It was easy for him, when his health permitted, to officiate in London. There was a carriage at his command, and the family with which he was domesticated being of his own persuasion, were as much interested in this point as himself. If he was disabled by indisposition, there was no cause for uneasiness on that account; his colleague, with whom he always maintained the most uninterrupted friendship, was on the spot to supply his place. When he was incapable of public labour, he refused to receive his salary, and at all times a third part of his income was devoted to charitable uses. In this there was no sacrifice, seeing that all his wants were provided for; but it was proof of a disposition which would have made any sacrifice from the same motives of love towards God and his fellow-creatures.

Perhaps the peculiar position in which he was placed increased both the respect and the affection with which his congregation regarded him. It made him independent of them; and they looked upon him not in the light of a dependent upon the wealthy family with which he was domesticated, nor as a humble friend, but as what in reality he was, one of its members, adopted into it by the special friendship of one of the wealthiest and most considerable persons attached to the dissenting cause. Indeed, if Sir Thomas Abney appeared to them in the same light as he did to Mr. Watts, they must have thought him not only one of the best, but also one of the greatest men in the nation...

...the congregation felt that in continuing his services to them as far as his feeble health would permit, he conferred upon them a favour and a kindness which could not be imputed to any motive of interest, or even of his own convenience, but ut proceeded from his sense of duty, his zeal in the dissenting cause, and his attachment to them; they prized them ther

efore, as they ought, the more highly. And they were proud of his growing reputation, for he was then the best preacher among the dissenters, and one of the best of those times. Not that his sermons can be placed in the first, or even second rank of such compositions; but they were well adapted to the great purpose of present effect; and they had all the advantages that could be given them by an impressive elocution, and a manner of delivery which with curious felicity seems to have been at the same time elaborately studied, yet earnestly sincere.

"I hate," said he, "the thoughts of making any thing in religion, heavy or tiresome." In another place he ventures to say, that perhaps the modes of preaching in the best churches still want some degree of reformation; --that reformation he endeavoured to bring about in his own. "Suppose two preachers," he says, "were desired to minister to the same auditory, on a day of fasting or praise, and on the same subject too. One of them has all the beauty, force, and skill of clear and calm reasoning; the other not only instructs well, but powerfully moves the affections with sacred oratory. Which of these two will best secure the attention of the people, and guard them from drowsiness or wandering? Surely, he that touches the heart, will fix the eyes and the ears and all the powers; while he that merely endeavours to inform the head, will find many wandering eyes, and some sleepers."

In another sermon upon the same subject, "The Use of the Passions in Religion," he exclaims, "Does divine love send dreaming preachers to call dead sinners to life, --preachers that are content to leave their hearers asleep on the precipice of eternal destruction? Have they no such thing as passion belonging to them? Have they no piety? Have they no fear? Have they no sense of the worth of souls? Have they no springs of affection within them? -- Or do they think their hearers have none? -- Or is passion so vile a power that it must be all devoted to things of flesh and sense, and must never be applied to things divine and heavenly? Who taught any of us this lazy and drowsy practice? Does God or his prophets, or Christ or his apostles, instruct us in this modish art of still life, this 'lethargy of preaching?' Did the great God ever appoint statues for his ambassadors, to invite sinners to his mercy? Words of grace written upon brass or marble, would do the work almost as well! -- How cold and dull and unaffected with divine things, is mankind by nature! -- How careless and indolent is a whole assembly, when the preacher appears like a lifeless engine, pronouncing words of law or grace, when he speaks of divine things in such a dry, in such a cold and formal manner, as though they had no influence on his own heart! When the words freeze upon his lips, the hearts of hearers are freezing also."

In an ordination sermon he warned the aspirant student against the fault which would most easily beset him. "Do not say within yourself, how much or how elegantly I can talk upon such a text; but what can I say most usefully to those who hear me, for the instruction of their minds, for the correction of their consciences, and for the persuasion of their hearts? Be not fond of displaying your learned criticisms in clearing up the terms and phrases of a text, when scholars only can be benefited by them; nor spend away the precious moments of the congregation, in making them hear you explain what is clear enough before, and hath no need of explaining; nor in proving that which is so obvious that it needs no proof. This is little better than trifling with God and man. Think not, how can I make a sermon correct and earnest, but how I can make the most profitable sermon for my hearers: -- not what fine things I can say, either in a way of criticism or philosophy, or in a way of oratory or harangue; but what powerful words I can speak to impress the consciences of those that hear with a serious and lasting sense of moral, divine and eternal things. Judge wisely what to leave out, as well as what to speak. Let not your chief design be to work up a sheet, or to hold out an hour, but to save a soul."

In another part of the same exhortation, he says, "Get the substance of your sermon which you have prepared for the pulpit, so wrought into your head and heart, by reason and meditation, that you may have it at command, and speak to your hearers with freedom; not as if you were reading or repeating your lesson to them, but as a man sent to teach and persuade them to faith and holiness. Deliver your discourses to the people like a man that is talking to them in good earnest about their most important concerns, and their everlasting welfare --like a messenger sent from heaven, who would fain save sinners from hell, and allure souls to God and happiness. Do not indulge that lazy way of reading over your prepared paper, as a schoolboy does an oration out of Livy or Cicero, who has no concern in the things he speaks. But let all the warmest zeal for God, and compassion for perishing men, animate your voice and countenance; and let the people see and feel, as well as hear, that you are speaking to them about things of infinite moment, and on which your own eternal interest lies as well as theirs.

"If you pray and hope for the assistance of the Spirit of God in every part of your works, do not resolve always to confine yourself precisely to the mere words and sentences which you have written down in your private preparations. Far be it from me to encourage a preacher to venture into public work without due preparation by study, and a regular composure of his discourse. We must not serve God with what cost us nothing. All our wisest thoughts and cares are due to the sacred service of the temple. But what I mean is, that we should not impose upon ourselves just such a number of precomposed words and lines to be delivered in the hour, without daring to speak a warm sentiment that comes fresh upon the mind. Why may you not hope for some lively turns of thought, some new pious sentiments which may strike light and heat

and life into the understandings and hearts of those that hear you? In the zeal of your ministrations, why may you not expect some bright and warm and pathetic forms of argument and persuasion to offer themselves to your lips, for the more powerful conviction of sinners, and the encouragement and comfort of humble Christians? Have you not often found such an enlargement of thought, such a variety of sentiment and freedom of speech, in common conversation upon an important subject, beyond what you were apprised of beforehand? And why should you forbid yourself this natural advantage in the pulpit, and in the fervour of sacred ministrations, when also you have more reason to hope for divine assistance?"

...Watts himself preached upon the plan which he advised; he wrote, it is said, and committed to memory the leading features of his cursory sermon; the rest he trusted to his extemporary power and the promised assistance of the Holy Spirit. .. He prepared them for the press as well as for the pulpit: much therefore of what had been introduced in delivery, his own memory, we may be sure, would retain; and as the practice of taking notes from a distinguished preacher was at that time not unusual, it is probable that in this way, by which so many of Owen's sermons were preserved by Sir John Hartopp, his recollection may have been assisted.

Dr. Johnson has observed that "his low stature, which very little exceeded five feet, graced him with no advantage of appearance in the pulpit;" but the pulpit is a place in which that defect could entirely be supplied, and where the feebleness of his form and figure would be least perceived, while his benign countenance, and strong eye, and animated manner, produced their full effect. His friend, Dr. Gibbons, once asked him if he did not sometimes find himself too much awed by his auditory; "he replied, that when such a gentleman of eminent abilities and learning had come into the assembly and taken his eye, he felt something like a momentary tremour; but that he recovered himself by remembering what God said to the prophet Jeremiah, 'Be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them.'" It was little likely that he should be confounded, deservedly popular as he was in his own sphere, and properly conscious of his own power, and carefully as he had studied both the arts of composition and delivery. "I once mentioned," says Dr. Johnson, "the reputation which Mr. Foster had gained by his proper delivery to my friend Dr. Hawkesworth, who told me, that in the art of pronunciation he was far inferior to Dr. Watts." The correctness of his pronunciation, and the elegance of his diction, are said to have contributed greatly to his uncommon popularity as a preacher. It was doubtless as much from feeling, as for the sake of oratorical effect, that he always paused at the conclusion of any weighty sentence; this gave a solemnity to his words, and allowed time for the impression to be deeply and strongly fixed.

His sermons are so long, that in printing them he almost always inserted a notice about the middle of each, that it might conveniently be divided there. What he suspected might be found too long for reading, he would probably have thought too long for preaching, if custom had not then exacted long measure in such discourses. "We are not called," said he, preaching on the observance of Sunday, "to draw out the duties of worship to such unreasonable and tiresome lengths; nor to be so incessant and uninterrupted in works of religion on this day, as would overmuch fatigue the spirits, and overpress animal nature. This does not tend to the edification of men or the honour of God; but it has a certain and evident tendency to prejudice younger persons against the observation of the Lord's-day, if we render the service of it too irksome and tedious."

On the observance of the Sabbath, Dr. Watts's opinion was reasonable and tolerant. After showing that under the Jewish dispensation no works of necessity or of mercy were forbidden on that day, he says: "Under the New Testament we have no strict and severe prohibitions of every care and labour in the common return of the Lord's-day, where they do not interfere with the primary design of it, that is, the worship of God, and our best improvement thereby. And therefore I say, when the necessary labours of a few on some part of the day, by providing food and other conveniences of life, render many more persons capable of spending the day in religion, I cannot find that the New Testament forbids it. I say in some part of the Lord's-day, for I think none ought to be so constantly employed in secular affairs as to exclude the whole day from its proper business, that is, religion or devotion, except in the cases of necessity, above mentioned. I think it may be maintained in general, that, as whatsoever tends to destroy or nullify the great design of religious worship should be omitted on the Lord's-day, so some lesser labours, which tend to make the performances of religion more easy, cheerful, and regular to ourselves, and to great numbers of others, may safely be performed on this day without a wilful violation of it." And having premised that, as he would not bind new burdens on the servants of Christ, so neither would he release what Christ has bound, he concludes that, "according as our constitution is more or less healthy, or our circumstances in the world, as servants or masters, as poor or rich, call us more or less to necessary works on this day, so we are to employ ourselves in the affairs of religion at such hours, and with such intervals of relief and refreshment, as that the sabbath of the Lord may be a pleasure to us, and may not overtax feeble nature, instead of giving it rest. We should all employ this day to the designs and ends appointed, to the honour of God and our risen Saviour; not with peevish rigour and superstitious abstinences— not in indulgences of the flesh and lazy idleness,— not in sports and pastimes,— but with Christian wisdom improve our time for religious purposes, according to our capacities and stations; knowing that we are in a state of gospel liberty, freed from a state and spirit of bondage, and rejoicing in the Lord, our deliverer and Saviour."

This is entirely in accord with the gentle spirit of moderation and benevolence that pervades all his works. Johnson admired his meekness of opposition, and his mildness of censure in his theological writings; and observes that orthodoxy was united with charity not only in his works, but in his mind. Charity, indeed, in its full Christian sense, was one of his favorite themes. "I find a strange pleasure," he says, "in discoursing of this virtue, hoping that my very soul may be moulded into its divine likeness. I would always feel it inwardly warming my heart; I would have it look through my eyes continually, and it should be ever ready upon my lips to soften every expression of my tongue; I would dress myself in it as my best raiment; I would put it on upon my faith and hope, not so as entirely to hide them, but as an upper and more visible vesture, constantly to appear in among men. For our Christian charity is to evidence our other virtues."

So completely was he conformed to this Christian temper, that even when engaged in controversy he seems never to have been provoked to any angry feeling nor tempted to an uncharitable one...

...Born and bred a Calvinist, after the "most strictest sect" of that persuasion, it was not to be expected that he should easily resign for himself the high privilege of his predestination, still less that they within whose circle he was circumscribed, who considered themselves, as they have seriously been called, to be kings incog. upon earth, should consent to have the entail of their crowns cut off and take only the common lot of inheritance with other men. That he and they were by in defeasible election assured of salvation, was what he could willingly and joyfully believe; but his understanding, his tenderness for his fellow-creatures, and his piety made him shrink from what had ever been held as a consequent article of the same creed, that the other and far greater part of the human race were, by an equally irrevocable decree, doomed to sin and wrath and everlasting punishment. "Surely," says he, "the Lord Jesus would never be sent in flaming fire to render vengeance on those that obey not the gospel, if there was no sufficient salvation provided in that gospel which commands them to receive it." "Can we think that the righteous Judge of the world will merely send words of grace and salvation amongst them, on purpose to make his creatures so much the more miserable, when there is no real grace to salvation contained in those words for them who refuse to receive it?" "It is very hard to suppose, that when the word of God, by the general commands, promises, threatenings, given to all men whatsoever, and often repeated therein, represents mankind as in a state of probation, and in the way towards eternal rewards or eternal punishments, according to their behaviour in this life, — I say it is hard to suppose all this should be no real and just representation, but a mere amusement! that all these proposals of mercy and displays of the gracious dealings of God, should be an empty show, with regard to all the millions of mankind, besides the few that are chosen to happiness! and that they should really be so fixed in a wretched, hopeless, and deplorable state, under the first sin of the first man, that they are utterly irrecoverable from the ruins of it!" ...

If Watts had flourished in the ages of the schoolmen, acute as he was, the appellation which his disciples would have devised to honour his name, would have been derived rather from his piety and benevolence, his love of God and man, than from his metaphysical speculations; for even in those days it was by his virtues, by the Christian spirit which animated him, that this devout and amiable man would have been peculiarly characterized. He lived in better times, and was as fortunate in his station as in the age in which his lot was cast. In his own circle he enjoyed the highest reputation. The universities of Edinburgh and Aberdeen spontaneously conferred on him the degree of Doctor in Divinity; and Johnson has justly observed, that "academical honours would have more value if they were always bestowed with equal judgment." No circumstance, either public or private, tended to provoke in him any angry or acrimonious feelings. Strongly as he was attached to the general principle of nonconformity, there was no bitterness in his dissent; he lived not only in charity with all men, but on terms of good will and friendship with some of the most eminent of the clergy. All parties agreed in rendering justice to the benignity of his disposition, the usefulness of his labours, and the purity of his life.

It was from motives of gratitude towards Sir Thomas and Lady Abney that he first engaged in the humbler parts of education. His Art of Reading and Writing English was dedicated to their daughters, for whose use it was originally drawn up, at a time when, being incapable of more public work, he thought himself bound to make his best acknowledgment of the uncommon generosity and kindness which invited him into that family: this could be done, he said, in no way more grateful to them, nor more pleasing to himself, than by offering his assistance in the education of their children, then in their youngest years. The sense of a higher duty induced him to compose his catechisms for their use; one for children of three or four years old, and a second for those of seven or eight; both intended as preparatory for the Assembly's Shorter Catechism. "I well know," said he, "that some of my particular friends imagine my time is employed in too mean a service while I write for babes; but I content myself with this thought, that nothing is too mean for a servant of Christ to engage in, if he can thereby most effectually promote the kingdom of his blessed Maker. Perhaps it is not proper for me to say, and the world will hardly believe, what pains have been taken in composing these catechisms; with what care I have endeavoured to select the most easy and necessary parts of our religion, in order to propose them to the memory of children according to their ages; what laborious diligence has been used to seek out all the plainest and most familiar forms of speech, t

hat the great things of God and the mysteries of the gospel might be brought down to the capacities of children. It is not for me to say how many hours and days and weeks have been spent in revising and examining every word and expression, that, if possible, nothing might be inserted which might give just occasion of offence to pious persons and families; that nothing might be left out which was necessary for children to know in that tender age; and that no word, phrase, or sentiment, if possible, might be admitted, which could not be brought in some measure within the reach of a child's understanding."

He accompanied this with what he called "A Preservative from the Sins and Follies of Childhood and Youth," or a brief account of the vices and frailties to which childhood and youth are liable, and of which they should be warned early; with arguments against them, taken from reason and Scripture. This was drawn up in the way of question and answer; but it was not called a catechism, because he proposed it not to be learnt by heart, but to be frequently read and inculcated. He composed also catechisms of scriptural names, and of the more important transactions recorded in the Bible, and, in the same form, what he entitled "A Short View of the whole Scripture History," but which is in reality, as any such view must be, of considerable length. His love of children made him delight in employing himself for their instruction and amusement. He composed rhyming lines for copy-books, containing moral instruction, and beginning with every letter of the alphabet; copies, composed of short letters, for teaching to write even; and others, each line of which contained all the twenty-four letters...

Dr. Johnson says, "he could not praise his poetry itself highly, but he could praise its design;" — and "this praise the general interest of mankind requires to be given to writers who please and do not corrupt, who instruct and do not decoy." No compositions of the kind have obtained such extensive use as his Hymns and Songs for Children. Doddridge relates, in a letter to him, an instance of the effect they produced, and the affectionate reverence with which his name was in consequence regarded. "I was preaching" he says to a large assembly of plain country people, at a village, when, after a sermon from Hebrews vi. 12, we sung one of your hymns, which, if I remember right, was the 140th of the second book; and in that part of the worship I had the satisfaction to observe tears in the eyes of several of the people. After the service was over, some of them told me that they were not able to sing, so deeply were their minds affected; and the clerk in particular said he could hardly utter the words as he gave them out." The hymn indeed was likely to have this effect upon an assembly, whose minds were under the immediate impression produced by a pathetic preacher; and it is one of the advantages of devotional singing that they who bear a part in it, affect themselves.

Give me the wings of faith to rise
Within the veil, and see
The Saints above, how great their joys,
And bright their glories be.

Once they were mourning here below,
And wet their couch with tears;
They wrestled hard, as we do now,
With sins, and doubts, and fears.

I ask them whence their victory came:
They with united breath
Ascribe their conquest to the Lamb,
Their triumph to his death.

They mark'd the footsteps that he trod,
(His zeal inspired their breast,)
And, following their incarnate God,
Possess the promised rest.

Our glorious Leader claims our praise,
For his own pattern given,
While the long cloud of witnesses
Show the same path to Heaven.

"They were most of them," Doddridge continues, "poor people, who work for their living yet on the mention of your name, I found that they had read several of your books with delight; and that your Psalms and Hymns were almost their daily entertainment ... I mention the matter just as it occurred, and am persuaded that it is only a familiar and natural specimen

of what often takes place amongst a multitude of Christians who never saw your face."

"I have been in pain," says Colonel Gardiner, in a letter to Doddridge, lest that excellent person, (Dr. Watts,) should be called to heaven before I had an opportunity to let him know how much his works have been blessed in me, and of course to return him my hearty thanks; for though it is owing to the operation of the Blessed Spirit that any thing works effectually upon our hearts, yet if we are not thankful to the instrument which God is pleased to make use of, which we do see, how shall we be thankful to the Almighty whom we have not seen? Well am I acquainted with his works, especially with his Psalms, Hymns, and Lyrics. How often, by singing some of them when by myself, on horseback and elsewhere, has the evil spirit been made to flee away,

Whene'er my heart in tune was found
Like David's harp of solemn sound."

From such testimonies to the effect of his poems Watts must have received more heartfelt satisfaction than the highest degree of critical approbation and popular applause could have communicated to a mind like his...

Feeble as Dr. Watts always was in body, and much as he had suffered from illness, he attained to a good old age. The conduct of some very near relations embittered his latter days; and for a while he seemed, being at the time in a state of extreme weakness, stupefied by it to such a degree as hardly to take notice of any thing about him. The worst part of this behaviour, which one of Doddridge's friends characterizes as "most marvelous, infamous, enormous wickedness," was concealed from him. "Lady Abney," says the writer, "keeps him in peaceful ignorance; and his enemies at a becoming distance; so that in the midst of this cruel persecution he lives comfortably; and when a friend asks him how he does, answers, 'Waiting God's leave to die.' It was in this stage of his decay that he mentioned the observation of an aged minister, how "the most learned and knowing Christians, when they come to die, have only the same plain promises of the Gospel for their support, as the common and unlearned; and so," said he, "I find it. It is the plain promises of the Gospel that are my support; and I bless God that they are plain promises; that do not require much labour and pains to understand them; for I can do nothing now but look into my Bible for some promise to support me, and live upon that."

In this patient and peaceful state of mind, on the 25th of November 1748, and in the 75th year of his age, he departed "in sure and certain hope." His body was deposited in the burial-ground of Bunhill-fields. His pupil, Sir John Hartopp, and his true friend, Lady Abney, under whose roof he had partaken of all the comforts of affluence, for six-and-thirty years, erected a handsome tomb over his grave; the epitaph he had composed himself, in these humble words:

ISAAC WATTS, D. D.
Pastor of a Church of Christ in London,
successor to
THE REV. JOSEPH CARYL, DR. JOHN OWEN, MR. DAVID
CLARKSON, AND DR. ISAAC CHAUNCY;
after fifty years of feeble labours in the gospel,
interrupted by four years of tiresome sickness,
was at last dismissed to his rest.
In uno Jesu omnia.
2 Cor. v. 8. Absent from the body and present with the Lord.
Col. iii. 4. When Christ who is my life shall appear, then shall I also
appear with him in glory.

Robert Southley
Keswick, August 20, 1834.