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MICHAEL SAWARD

# Timothy Dudley-Smith: An Acknowledged Master Craftsman

**As Timothy Dudley-Smith celebrates his 80th birthday, Michael Saward explores his gifts and ministry as a hymn-writer. As well as providing a potted biography, he draws attention to how many hymns Dudley-Smith has written, surveys those which have been most widely published, introduces some that are less well-known, and identifies the features of his work that make him such a significant evangelical hymn-writer.**

Not all our hymn texts will be, or even should be, Rolls Royces; but they should all be decently roadworthy, and as true to Scripture, as free from blemish, as carefully constructed, as appealing to the imagination, heart, and will, and as user-friendly as we can make them.

So wrote Timothy Dudley-Smith in the Foreword to his most recent supplementary volume of hymns, *A Door for the Word*, published in early 2006. At that date he had produced 321 such texts, and, sadly, had suffered, as others of us have, from being known for a tiny handful! Everyone knows *Tell out my soul* (May 1961) and *Lord, for the years* (February 1967) but, after those....? Yet, of all today's hymn-writers, he is probably alone in producing the highest percentage of Rolls Royce texts and a very small scrap-yard of old bangers.

Fifteen years ago, Christopher Idle (no slouch in the field of hymnology) described Dudley-Smith as 'the foremost Evangelical hymn-writer in the second half of this century' and the dawn of a new era has hardly challenged that verdict. Writing of the success, worldwide, of *Tell out my soul* (which Idle is not persuaded as being his finest hymn), he asks, 'what kind of man produces a hymn to sweep the board across all sorts of church boundaries?'

Born on Boxing Day 1926, and thus at the point of celebrating his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Dudley-Smith is the son of a schoolmaster who 'had the teacher's gift of making you enjoy what he enjoyed'. Sadly, the boy was only eleven when his father died but he was already an enthusiastic reader of Tennyson, Kipling, Newbolt, Masfield and de la Mare. It was not uncommon for those of us who grew up in pre-war years to learn, parrot-fashion, much of that kind of verse (and retain chunks of it for a life-time). Dudley-Smith began to write what he dismissively calls 'juvenile verse' from an early age and the image of vivid, powerful, strong, and imaginative language began to take its hold. He still calls it 'stirring stuff' and it certainly was, not least to a growing boy. '*There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night*' (Newbolt, and its climax in the

bloodied and broken square in the desert as the voice of the young subaltern steadies the ranks with his '*Play up! play up! and play the game!*' may no longer be more than a parody of Victorian imperialism but it meant a lot to a couple of generations of young public schoolboys in those distant years in which Dudley-Smith and I grew up in the midst of a ruthless war. Before the Sneering Sixties came on the scene, patriotism and the power of words were not a matter for disdain. In quite a different context he says that playing Portia at the age of twelve helped to develop 'a love for words'. Somewhat later, writing and performing comic verse which he describes as 'topical, irreverent, gently satirical' was 'very useful apprenticeship' towards future hymn-writing. (I can confirm exactly the same experience).

## Early career

Following half a decade at Tonbridge during the War years, Dudley-Smith went up to Cambridge and read, first maths and, then, theology at Pembroke College. He graduated in 1947, going on to Ridley Hall for his pre-ordination training. He was made deacon by Bishop Christopher Chavasse of Rochester to serve a title at St Paul's, Northumberland Heath, in Erith. Duly priested, he was appointed Head of the Cambridge University Mission in Bermondsey and an Honorary Chaplain to Bishop Chavasse. In 1955, by way of contrast, he found himself Editorial Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance and Editor of the new magazine *Crusade*, created out of the Billy Graham crusades at Haringay and Wembley.

In 1959 he became Assistant Secretary to the Church Pastoral-Aid Society and married Arlette. Six years later he was Secretary of the Society, a post which he held until 1973. During this period he began to write hymns, worked on the *Psalm Praise* team and made the highly risky, but strategically vital, decision to publish *Youth Praise* – two volumes which hit the streets in 1966 and 1969 and sold well over a million copies. All the obvious evangelical publishers had rejected the project as unsaleable so Michael Baughen (the Editor) and Dudley-Smith (the Publisher) were vindicated.

He was appointed Archdeacon of Norwich in 1973 and Bishop of Thetford in 1981 where he remained until his retirement in 1992.

## The early hymns

May 1961 saw a version of the *Magnificat*, which appeared in the *New English Bible*, catch the editorial eye of Dudley-Smith when the book came to him for review. He had earlier tried out one or two poems but never a hymn. Now, still with poetry in mind, he rapidly wrote four stanzas, beginning *Tell out my soul*, and put them out of his mind until Canon Herbert Taylor, Vicar of Christ Church, Orpington (the very church to which Michael Baughen and I belonged before our ordination) asked him whether he ever wrote hymns. 'No' said Dudley-Smith, 'I can't read music and I'm totally unmusical'. Taylor, who was chairman of a new hymnbook committee, pursued the matter and out came *Tell out my soul*. The committee liked the text and included it in their *Anglican Hymn Book*, published in 1965.

This was the first and only hymn that he wrote in Blackheath and the irony is that he never intended it to be a hymn. It was first sung at a large clergy conference

at Church House, Westminster. Idle says that it 'was nearly sunk' by the selected tune. Dudley-Smith, who, fortunately, wasn't there, later heard it on tape ('or as much as I could bear to listen to'). I, who was there, fully confirm these depressing reactions. It was a disaster, with 600 clergy slowly grinding to a halt. Baughen later produced a tune which saved it in the short term and the words were rapidly linked up with *Woodlands*, which took it all round the world and into the 130 hymnbooks or more that now carry it.

## Erratic usage

We must soon turn to look at the texts that have proved to be the most popular but one disturbing factor quickly emerges. As we have seen, Dudley-Smith has produced 321 texts in the past forty-five years. In terms of popularity, the top twelve fall into three authorship periods. Six come from the 1960s, five from the 1970s and one was written in 1982. Not one of the top twenty-one was written after 1982. In other words, not one of his most widely used has been written in the past quarter of a century. Starting with *Tell out my soul*, Idle asks, 'what must it feel like to see one's first text become a blockbusting hit, as if the 200-odd others since then have all been in decline?'. Amend that line (written in 1992) to '300-odd' and we see that not one of Dudley-Smith's texts since 1982 has, in publishing terms, been successful.

Why is this? It would seem that editors and publishers are besotted by success and congregations are inevitably forced to drift along behind them. If Joe Bloggs writes half a dozen good hymns, these are the ones endlessly repeated in each new book. No-one even looks at the later texts, however good they may be, unless a big conference (say, Spring Harvest, for example) is actively promoting one or two 'tame' writers and their annual booklets. Hymns, in the strict sense, don't have that kind of promotion behind them.

This has undoubtedly been the case with Dudley-Smith (and he isn't alone). He has quite evidently written many superb hymns since the early 1980s but no-one knows them so no-one uses them. They can be found in his major collection *A House of Praise* (2003) and even more recently in *A Door for the Word* (2006). His publisher is Oxford University Press.

What, then, are his top dozen, as regards successful publishing? The following list provides first line, date, and number of times published:

Tell out my soul	1961	190
Lord, for the years	1967	63
Sing a new song	1971	53
Name of all majesty	1979	48
I lift my eyes	1968	41
Safe in the shadow	1970	40
Fill your hearts	1982	36
Holy child	1966	34
We come as guests	1975	30
As water to the thirsty	1975	29
A purple robe	1968	29
Faithful vigil ended	1967	28

There is one slight anomaly. His hymn, *Not for the tongues of heaven's angels* (written in 1984 at the request of GIA Chicago, USA) has been published 35 times but never in a British hymnbook. Virtually all its use has been in the United States. I wonder why?

It is interesting to discover that one hymn, which Dudley-Smith describes as 'one of my favourites' has only been published twice in Britain (*Psalm Praise* in 1973 and *Sing Glory* in 1999) though twelve times in North America. It is a version of Psalm 19, *The stars declare his glory!* I have always thought it magnificent but I had to fight to get it into *Sing Glory* (of which I was Words' Editor). Perhaps *Anvil* readers can put pressure on future hymn-book editors to face up to the extraordinary fact of erratic editing.

### Awaiting recognition

This seems an appropriate point to draw attention to a series of hymns which are less well-known, chiefly because they have all been written in the past eight years. There clearly isn't space to print out all the verses so we shall have to be content with just two from each, in order to give the flavour. All of them can be found in either *A House of Praise* (AHP) or *A Door for the Word* (ADW).

The first celebrates God's word (March 1988, 5 verses, AHP 280)

Before the world's foundation,  
before the stars and sun,  
to summon all creation  
God spoke and it was done;  
the life of earth and oceans  
to breath and being stirred,  
the planets in their motions  
were ordered at his word.

His Name we come declaring  
who reigns enthroned above,  
the Word incarnate, sharing  
God's inmost life of love.  
To us for our discerning  
the ways of God are shown  
where, written for our learning,  
his word is read and known.

Secondly, the theme of conservation (July 1988, 5 verses, AHP 267).

The God who set the stars in space  
and gave the planets birth  
created for our dwelling place  
a green and fruitful earth;  
a world with wealth and beauty crowned  
of sky and sea and land,  
where life should flourish and abound  
beneath its Maker's hand.

A world of order and delight  
God gave for us to tend,  
to hold as precious in his sight,  
to nurture and defend;  
but yet on ocean, earth and air  
the marks of sin are seen,  
with all that God created fair  
polluted and unclean.

Thirdly, to honour Christ's ascension (January 2000, 4 verses, AHP 70)

Risen Lord in splendour seated,  
throned at God the Father's side,  
Prince of life who death defeated,  
Lamb who once for sinners died,  
Christ for ever Son and Saviour  
reigns in triumph glorified.

Love of God, unwearied, reaching  
furthest bounds of time and space,  
still by foolishness of preaching  
holding forth the word of grace,  
Christ for ever interceding  
builds his church in every place.

The resurrection, fourthly, is commemorated (December 2002, 4 verses, ADW 30).

<p>The final triumph won, the full atonement made, salvation's work is done, redemption's price is paid: the morning breaks, the dark is fled, for Christ is risen from the dead!</p>	<p>The tomb in which he lay lies empty now and bare; the stone is rolled away, no lifeless form is there: the sting is drawn from death and grave, for Christ is risen, strong to save!</p>
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Finally, Christ's work is affirmed (February 2005, 5 verses, ADW 28)

<p>Prince of life and Lord of glory, to whose Name be love and praise; Son of God, whose human story touches all our earthly days, still our guide and teacher be, as of old in Galilee.</p>	<p>Crowds who came where Christ was preaching, in the hills or by the shore, wondered at his gracious teaching, as no prophet taught before: where today your voice is heard tune our hearts to hear your word.</p>
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These are cited merely as examples of well-constructed hymns from recent years. In no way are they especially outstanding but, rather, good presentations of the Dudley-Smith ethos. They, with many others, well deserve a place in future hymn-books.

## Theological argument

Occasionally, Dudley-Smith's self-assessment shows patches at his elbows. He has written of 'my total lack of musical understanding' and this has led over many years to a failure to see that it did not take a musician to write good words. He says that he thought that the door 'was closed to me for ever, since hymns involve music'. Fortunately, that misunderstanding has long since been overcome.

A second area of difficulty has been created by his conviction that he does not have 'what is called "a first-class mind"'. He tells us that he enjoys 'the gentle foothills...but once the going gets steep I just don't possess the mental equipment needed'. This has sometimes demonstrated itself in terms of theological inexactitude. On one occasion the theological sticking point appeared in an excellent hymn to the Holy Spirit, *Spirit of God within me*, which he wrote in 1968. He called on the Spirit to '*strive till that image Adam lost, new-minted and restored... brightly bears the likeness of the Lord*'.

Idle mentioned that he could not reconcile himself to the word *lost* and I wrote to him making the same theological point. Surely, we both argued, Adam did not *lose* the divine image, however badly marred it became? This was a clear disagreement between us in the 1970s and Dudley-Smith was still defending his use of the *lost* concept in his main collection of texts, *A House of Praise* (p 332) in 2003, citing Charles Hodge and Charles Wesley, a distinctly contrasted theological pair. Ironically, his long-time mentor, Derek Kidner, in his commentary on Genesis, is quite clear that 'after the Fall, man is still said to be in God's image...as long as we are human we are, by definition, in the image of God'. The *New Bible Dictionary* agrees ('This divine image is neither losable or reducible') and H.L. Ellison in the

*International Bible Commentary* stresses that ‘it must not be understood that the image of God has now vanished’ as a consequence of the Fall. Dudley-Smith remains obdurate and the problematical word remains in the hymn. It is one of those cases where an editorial committee has to decide whether one questionable word makes a hymn unusable. Both the Words’ committees of *Hymns for Today’s Church* and *Sing Glory* offered ‘marred’ as an alternative but this was rejected. Eventually both teams conceded (grudgingly) that the hymn was too good to omit! The debate remains unsettled after twenty-seven years of argument. There’s nothing soft about hymn-writers.

Interestingly, in another hymn, *The Lord made man*, also about the Fall (which avoids *lost* language), Dudley-Smith writes superbly and with great poetic beauty, including these lines:

Herein all woes are brought to birth,  
all aching hearts and sunless skies:  
brightness is gone from all the earth,  
the innocence of nature dies.

That describes the impact of the Fall as well as anything that has ever been written in all Christian history.

## Essential qualities

We must turn now to the essentials of the hymn-writing art. Dudley-Smith, says Idle, is not a ‘writer of songs’. He builds well, cementing his bricks with ‘great care. There are few rough patches, sagging lines, or odd-shaped stones’. This obviously contrasts with the work of many song-writers who ‘are like builders who try to erect a chapel without first learning to build a wall’. It isn’t that hymns are good and songs are bad – they are merely different. Four elements mark a good hymn, three of which are not necessarily to be found in songs.

The traditional hymn (and Dudley-Smith writes these) is, as he says, ‘highly dependent upon rhyme and metre’. He sets out his goal as aiming for rhymes that are ‘inevitable but not predictable’. This means that rhymes are not slovenly. It won’t do to rhyme ‘king’ with ‘him’ or ‘win’ with ‘sing’. Many contemporary songs are, in this respect, he believes, ‘slipshod, unworthy and discordant’.

As to metre, this is also essential to good hymn-writing. You count the syllables and reject the idea of sticking in the occasional extra or concertina-ing words, in or out, to get some sort of line.

Alongside metre goes stress. This was an area where Dudley-Smith had to work hard in past years since, he says, in a number of places in his earlier texts, ‘the stresses jar’. Few would-be hymn-writers are aware of the importance of genuine stress-patterns. Song-writers, brought up on ‘pop’ music, rarely trouble with metre, rhyme and stress. Indeed, they frequently don’t understand what is meant by the terms. Even the best Christian song-writers rarely trouble to take them on board. Not so the genuine hymn-writer and none are better at it than Dudley-Smith.

As to rhythm, this is well-known in jazz and much earlier music. It is, according to Proust, ‘a primary element of ordered complexity’ as Dudley-Smith is keen to

point out. It is, he maintains, ‘woven into God’s creation’ and he cites the planets, seasons, and tides among other instances of rhythm’s importance.

## Conclusion

At the end of the last century, Dudley-Smith agreed to become a judge in the St Paul’s Cathedral Millennium Hymn Competition and demonstrated that he was thoroughly skilful not only in writing but also in assessing hymns. It would be good if he turned his attention to editing. Having done it in the preparation of *Common Praise* he could well be open to further work of that nature.

In recent years he has been honoured with a Lambeth M.Litt; the Vice-Presidency of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland; a Fellowship in its sister society in North America; and an OBE ‘for services to hymnody’.

He tells us that ‘hymn-writing has been for me a most enriching and entirely unexpected gift’, indeed, he concludes, ‘with other aspects of Christian ministry, “the best of all trades”’.

We, his friends and colleagues, thank God for the evident demonstration of these gifts by a first-class tradesman, who can regularly construct a Rolls Royce to order.

**Canon Michael Saward** is a hymn-writer, hymn-book editor, member of the Hymn Society, ex-Chairman of Jubilate Hymns, and Canon-Emeritus of St Paul’s Cathedral.

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