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Olney Hymns: a documentary footnote

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To mark the bicentenary of the publication of *Olney Hymns*, I wrote a two-part article which explored the origins and influence of this important collection of hymns, a direct product of the evangelical movement of the eighteenth century.¹ In the course of studying the interrelationships between various hymn books produced and used by Anglican evangelicals during this period, I recently came across a lesser-known collection of hymns which throws more light on the origins of the *Olney Hymns* by John Newton and William Cowper:

Sacred Hymns for the Children of God, As they journey to their Rest Above, by John Henry Langley. Oliver, Otridge & Watts, London 1776, 12°.

Neither the author nor the collection are noted in Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*, and the only reference to either I have discovered in hymnological handbooks is in Gadsby's *Memoirs of the Principal Hymn-Writers and Compilers*. According to Gadsby, Langley (1753–1792) was 'one of the early Calvinist Methodist preachers'² associated with the Countess of Huntingdon. The collection itself is respectfully dedicated to the Countess, and Langley clearly moved in the circle of evangelicals associated with her chapels. Among the subscribers to Langley's *Sacred Hymns* were the Revd Rowland and the Revd Walter Shirley.³ Another subscriber is listed thus: 'Wm Cooper, Esq. 4 Books'.⁴ This is probably William Cowper of Olney, for that is how he pronounced his name.⁵

The author's lengthy preface, to which is appended 'An Earnest and Familiar Address to Young Men', is dated 19 April 1776, that is, three years before the publication of *Olney Hymns*. In commending his own volume, Langley refers to the 'many excellent Things of this sort the Public have been already favoured with', and in particular mentions the hymns of Watts, Hart and Cennick.⁶ Langley continues:

There are many other Originals that I have not seen, and excellent Collections of eminent Persons abound, yet there are Two in Secret, the public appearance I should rejoice to see, as I conceive they would be of great use to the Church of Christ, and establish this sort of Poetry on so reputable a Footing, that, like the Lord to his People, the Glory may be for a Defence against Attacks of every one, who, when the Lord has put a new Song in a Sinner's Mouth, their contracted Hearts would hinder Jesus of his due, or endeavour to pollute his Praise.⁷

Here is hinted at the general hostility, particularly from the Anglican establishment, opposing the newfangled hymnody of 'enthusiasm', which, according to Langley, may have been the reason for the delay in publishing what was to become *Olney Hymns*. So that the 'Two in Secret' might be identified, Langley adds the following cryptic footnote:

One of these is the eminent Defender of the Doctrines of the Church of England,⁸ the other a Clergyman also of the same Name with that great Ornament to Philosophy, to whose sublime Genius the World is indebted for a new System.⁹ This Gentleman, I am told, for some Time past, has composed One [hymn] a week, a few of them have made their appearance, and we cannot but long to see the rest of that delightful Garden, when a Cluster dropping over the Wall has so rich a Fragrance.¹⁰

A few months before *Olney Hymns* was published, 2 February 1779, Newton wrote to his patron, the Earl of Dartmouth, to explain that he had delayed in publishing the hymns in the hope that Cowper's health might improve and allow him to make further contributions to the collection. For the sake of his troubled colleague, Newton 'long withstood the solicitations of friends to print'.¹¹ One of those friends was John Henry Langley, whose collection of hymns underlines how greatly the Countess of Huntingdon and her associates influenced the development of Anglican evangelical hymnody, and how the whole area has yet to receive the full attention it deserves.

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NOTES

- 1 R. A. Leaver, 'Olney Hymns 1779', *Churchman*, 93, 1979, pp.327-42, and 94, 1980, pp.58-66.
- 2 J. Gadsby, *Memoirs of the Principal Hymn-Writers and Compilers of the 17th, 18th & 19th Centuries* (Gadsby, London 1882^s), p.90.
- 3 *Sacred Hymns*, sig. b vi^r.
- 4 *ibid.* None of these copies was apparently in Cowper's library at his death; see T. Wright, *The Life of William Cowper* (Unwin, London 1892), pp.662-5.
- 5 Wright, *op. cit.*, pp.161f.
- 6 One is left to conjecture why Langley did not mention Charles Wesley by name.
- 7 *Sacred Hymns*, p.vii.
- 8 That is, Cowper.
- 9 That is, Isaac Newton; thus the clergyman of the same name is John Newton.
- 10 *Sacred Hymns*, p.vii; see *Churchman*, 93, 1979, pp.328-32 for details of the hymns which had appeared in print before 1776.
- 11 *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, 15th Report), Appendix, Part I, Vol. 3 (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1896), p.245.