

## S. F. SMITH AND 'AMERICA'

In May of 1887 an elderly tourist was sitting in the gallery of the Board of Trade in Chicago, Illinois, quietly observing all the commotion of buying and selling. Someone on the floor recognized him and pointed him out to others, whereupon the clamour quickly subsided as traders ceased their dealing to pay tribute to the old man. Presently out of the wheat pit came the sound of familiar words:

My country, 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing;  
Land where my fathers died,  
Land of the pilgrims' pride,  
From every mountainside  
Let freedom ring.

My native country, thee,  
Land of the noble free,  
Thy name I love;  
I love thy rocks and rills,  
Thy woods and templed hills;  
My heart with rapture thrills  
Like that above.

Then the men gave their visitor a tumultuous cheer. The Secretary of the Board escorted him to the floor, where all the members flocked around him, reaching out eagerly to shake the hand of the 79-year-old author of 'America'. Then, removing their hats, they sang the rest of the hymn. (1)

Let music swell the breeze,  
And ring from all the trees  
Sweet freedom's song;  
Let mortal tongues awake,  
Let all that breathe partake,  
Let rocks their silence break,  
The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God, to thee,  
Author of liberty,  
To thee we sing;  
Long may our land be bright  
With freedom's holy light;  
Protect us by thy might,  
Great God, our King.

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Samuel Francis Smith (1808-1895) became famous as a result of the lines he penned as a divinity student at Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts in 1831. In later years he would occasionally complain that all his other activities were customarily overlooked in favour of the result of one brief burst of creativity when he was twenty-two. His labours as a Baptist clergyman, writer and editor are indeed worthy of mention. A product of the Boston Latin School and Harvard College, Smith completed his theological studies in 1832 and went on to pastorates at Waterville, Maine (where he also served as professor of modern languages at Waterville - now Colby - College), and from 1842 at Newton Centre, Massachusetts. From 1842 to 1848 he also edited *The Christian Review*. Throughout his career he continued to write hymns (including 'The Morning Light is Breaking'), poems, essays and historical and biographical books. One poem, 'The Lone Star', 1868, is said to have saved the Telugu mission at Nellore, India, and to have helped the 1925 argument for strengthening Baptist missionary efforts in Asia. With fellow Baptist minister, Baron Stow (1801-1869), he edited *The Psalmist*, for several decades the hymnal most widely used by American Baptists. Smith's marriage (16th September 1834) to Mary White Smith, a granddaughter of Hezekiah Smith (Baptist minister and missionary, 1737-1805), produced six children. One son, Daniel

Appleton White Smith, went to Burma in 1863 and served for 40 years as president of the Karen Baptist Theological Seminary. Samuel Francis Smith died suddenly at Boston railway station on his way to fulfil a preaching engagement.(2)

For all that Smith accomplished in his long career, he would be scarcely known today but for the words that became the unofficial national hymn of the United States. And those he wrote almost by accident. He reported years afterwards that he had in no wise intended to write a national hymn, and did not feel he had done so at the end of thirty minutes jotting on scrap paper. In fact, he laid his finished stanzas aside and nearly forgot them. Weeks passed before he looked at them again and dispatched them into a wider world, into history and the grateful hearts of his countrymen.

Actually, he sent his lines only to his friend Lowell Mason (1792-1872), America's premier music educator and a leading composer, anthologist and conductor. His tunes include 'Missionary Hymn' ('From Greenland's icy mountains') and 'Olivet' ('My faith looks up to Thee'). He made a fortune from the royalties on his sacred music. His principal achievement was the successful campaign to add music to the curriculum of the Boston city schools.(3)

Smith sent his work to Mason because he had initially prompted his effort, by passing him some German music books. These Mason had from William Channing Woodbridge (1794-1845), who spent 1824-29 in Europe, studying the educational systems of Switzerland and Germany.(4) Mason was seeking songs suitable for schoolchildren. Mason passed these books to Smith, who was a good linguist: 'I can't read these, but they contain good music, which I should be glad to use. Turn over the leaves, and if you find anything particularly good, give me a translation or imitation of it, or write a wholly original song - anything, so I can use it'. A patriotic German tune, *Heil dir im Siegerkranz*, especially appealed to Smith as he worked his way through the texts that historic February day. Struck 'by its simple and natural movement, and its fitness for children's choirs', he set about composing new words for the tune, not realising it was already the melody of the British national anthem and of patriotic songs in other European countries and in the United States as well. The tune had been published in *Harmonia Anglicana* in 1744 (London); the first public performance of 'God Save the King' was at the Drury Lane Theatre on 28 September 1745. The tune was printed in the American colonies in 1761 in James Lyon's *Urania* (Philadelphia). After independence Americans wrote many new sets of words to the melody, such as 'God Save America', 'God Save the Thirteen States', 'God Save the President', and 'God Save George Washington'. An eighteenth-century feminist wrote a poem called 'Rights of Woman', which began

God save each female's right  
Show to her ravish'd sight  
Woman is free.

Smith apparently knew of none of these. Late in life he stated: 'I had no thought of writing a national hymn; had I done so, I should probably have taken more pains to criticise and to perfect it. It went

from me, however, and the people took it up .... I noticed that the German words were patriotic, but I did not read them through, and the hymn is in no sense a translation. It was the result of a sudden inspiration, quickly thrown off, and, to my surprise, at once adopted'.(5)

Smith's words first appeared, without music, in a broadside for an Independence Day ceremony in 1831 at Boston's Park Street Church. Lowell Mason had liked the product well enough to include 'America' in the programme at this celebration by schoolchildren. As originally written and performed, the hymn contained five stanzas, the third being:

No more shall tyrants here  
With haughty steps appear,  
And soldier-bands;  
No more shall tyrants tread  
Above the patriot dead -  
No more our blood be shed  
By alien hands.

Music critics have noted that these lines gave the hymn too much of a martial air, thereby destroying its simplicity and charm.(6) The first printing of Smith's words with the music was on 5 November 1832 under the title 'America' in Lowell Mason, *The Choir* (Boston). All five stanzas were included. Later, when the first sheet music was published (by C. Bradlee, Boston, under the title 'My Country! 'Tis of Thee'), and in subsequent printings, the text was restricted to the four in use today.(7)

We know, then, where, when, by whom, and to a large extent how 'America' came to be written. The facts concerning the immediate historical circumstances of the hymn's composition, publication, and initial performance are well known or at least recoverable without much difficulty. Equally important matters regarding Smith's achievement remain to be considered: what led this young Baptist divinity student to choose the words he did to go with the tune in front of him? What was it about his historical background and his cultural environment that may have influenced his choice of themes? Why was a person in training for Baptist ministry writing a hymn that expressed love of country and that emphasized, above all, freedom? No conclusive answers can be provided, but we can offer some tentative proposals.

Happily, we have a major clue to guide us in our speculation. The same year that Smith wrote 'America' a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), was travelling about the United States. Pondering such themes as God, country, and freedom, Tocqueville observed that, although religion never intervenes directly in the government of American society, it nonetheless functions as an important political institution, as a kind of school of republican virtue. Customs rooted in religion help make American democracy successful by thwarting self-interest and by producing public-spirited men and women capable of self-sacrifice. Americans think religion necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions. 'For the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the

other...'. Freedom could not get along without faith: 'How could society escape destruction if, when political ties are relaxed, moral ties are not tightened? And what can be done with a people master of itself if it is not subject to God?' In France Tocqueville 'had seen the spirits of religion and freedom almost always marching in opposite directions. In America I found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land'.(8)

S. F. Smith clearly believed that religious vitality was a necessary condition of political freedom and of perdurable republican government, that God was the 'Author of liberty', and that the nation properly relied for its existence on the protecting might of 'Great God, our King'. In some of his later hymns and poems Smith makes it even more clear than in 'America' that God is the real source of Americans' freedom. The second stanza of 'Auspicious morning, hail!' affirms that

When on the tyrant's rod  
Our patriot fathers trod,  
And dared be free,  
'Twas not in burning zeal,  
Firm nerves, and hearts of steel,  
Our country's joy to seal,  
But, Lord, in thee.(9)

And in 'The Lord of battles praise', written for the dedication at Gettysburg of the monument for the 32nd Massachusetts Regiment in 1894, one finds these words:

Tell what high deeds were done,  
What triumphs freedom won,  
God was their help alone,  
Mighty to save.(10)

Smith shared the belief of most Protestants of his day that American life and freedom and government were dependent upon the favour of divine providence and also to some extent upon the piety of her citizens. The latter idea comes across in his sermon on the death in 1841, one month after taking office, of President William Henry Harrison. Harrison and his running mate ('Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too') had been part of the first all-out, rip-roaring political campaign in U.S. history. Whig enthusiasts had organized rallies and parades, made posters and campaign hats; sung special campaign songs, and provided for their supporters movable log cabins filled with coonskin caps and barrels of cider. Smith suggested that Harrison's death might have been God's way of chastising Americans for their excessive party spirit and for ignoring religious duties. 'God forbid that I should cool an honorable patriotism! But we have exhibited more than that. In the heat of party strife for a few months, every thing, sacred and profane, seemed swallowed up. Divine things were almost neglected ...'. Now 'God designs to show his disapproval of us as a nation. We have trusted in man, not in the God of armies'. Therefore 'God has clothed our festivals with sackcloth. He has converted our songs into sighs. He has smitten our Head, and every member feels it'.(11)

If men like Smith saw religion as the basis of social order, if they

saw the churches as the foundation of national liberty, they also stoutly believed that liberty fostered religion, that freedom in religion was a necessary condition of religious vitality. The Baptists especially espoused complete religious freedom; the separation of church and state made conviction truly free; the convert was to be won over through his or her own untrammelled will, not coerced. Consequently Baptists had carried on a long campaign against any form of established church.(12) Tocqueville noted that freedom had made religion stronger, not weaker, in America; and wondered why it was 'that by diminishing the apparent power of religion one increased its real strength'. He concluded that when religion is supported by the state, people resent it; when they are hostile toward the state they will be hostile toward the state's allies as well, so that a religion that relies on earthly power becomes as fragile as all worldly interests are.(13) One reason Smith praised freedom in his lines must have been that he knew its value as a friend of healthy religion. More broadly, he shared the contemporary view that freedom had brought general well-being to the United States, providing the right conditions for both the development of Christianity and for the growth of other worthy institutions (such as education) and of material prosperity.(14)

In fine, there was something altogether fitting in the young man's themes for his new hymn. For Americans, religion and freedom went together and were mutually reinforcing. Other aspects of the hymn we would expect to find in any piece written by a Baptist of this period: the theological simplicity, the lack of emotional inhibition, the positive view of human beings and society, and the appeal to the common man.

'America' immediately won citizens' hearty and lasting approbation. It was as Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'Autocrat of the Breakfast Table' and a fellow member of the Harvard Class of 1829, wrote in his poem for Smith's eightieth birthday:

Full many a poet's labor'd lines  
A century's creeping waves will hide,  
The verse a people's love enshrines  
Stands like the rock that breasts the tide.(15)

Holmes never felt his old classmate received the recognition his achievement truly deserved. Holmes particularly appreciated the hymn's strong personal note. He observed that if Smith 'had said "Our Country" the hymn would not have been immortal, but that "My" was a master stroke. Every one who sings the song, at once feels a personal ownership in his native land'. Holmes predicted that Smith's reputation would live 'when I and my words are long forgotten'.(16) In Holmes' poem 'The Boys', written for the 30th College reunion of the Class of '29, a common name could not hide his classmate from the world:

And there's a nice youngster of excellent pith:  
Fate tried to conceal him by naming him Smith;  
But he shouted a song for the brave and the free -  
Just read on his medal, 'My country', 'of thee!' (17)

Holmes felt Harvard neglected her hymnist-son, so on 5 March 1893 he wrote to President Eliot suggesting that the institution adopt

the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters and confer it upon Smith. 'It will look ill on the Quinquennial of 2500 A.D., to find his name without an honorary title from his Alma Mater.... His song will be sung centuries from now, when most of us and our pipings are forgotten'. Eliot's reply was discouraging and Smith never received an honorary degree from Harvard.(18) Holmes's lifelong respect for Smith, incidentally, never prevented the Autocrat from trying to convert Smith to Unitarianism whenever the Baptist preacher visited Holmes. The tempter supposed he would have succeeded if his guest had not been so hard of hearing.(19)

The most controversial period in the history of 'America' began in the 1930s, when parents and community leaders questioned the propriety of having children in state schools sing the hymn's fourth stanza (the only one that contains a reference to God) as part of their morning exercises. Many believed this practice to be a violation of the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty and so an attempt to breach the wall between church and state. The debate intensified in the 1950s as some viewed singing the hymn as an act of reverence designed to inculcate and strengthen moral and spiritual values and others saw it as an attempt to smuggle prayer into the schools disguised as patriotic singing. In landmark decisions in 1962 and 1963 the U.S. Supreme Court declared prayer and Bible-reading in state schools unconstitutional. It indicated, however, that some religious language (such as that found in anthems or in the Declaration of Independence) could be accommodated as part of a patriotic, rather than a religious, exercise. Schools across the country then moved to bring themselves into conformity with the Court's decisions by dropping their religious programmes; many continued, however, to offer a patriotic ceremony at the beginning of each day that included the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag followed by the singing of a patriotic song, which might be 'America' including the controversial fourth stanza. The debate in recent years has focused on whether to amend the Constitution to permit prayer in state schools; it is doubtful, though, that there will ever be a return to the kinds of religious programmes schools sponsored earlier in the century.

Perhaps British readers would be interested to know Smith's reaction when he discovered that the tune he had selected from the old German music book was actually the British national anthem. In some remarks for a souvenir programme printed in 1895 he stated: 'I do not share the regret of those who deem it an evil that the national tune of Britain and America is the same. On the contrary, I deem it a new and beautiful tie of union between the mother and the daughter, one furnishing the music ..., and the other the words'.(21) That this one tune could nicely serve a variety of purposes was illustrated the day Charles Dickens visited Philadelphia and the band struck up 'America'. Dickens arose, thinking his hosts were honouring him and his country with a rendition of the British anthem. Everyone else mistook his action as a compliment to the United States. All were pleased.(22)

#### NOTES

1 Henry S. Burrage, *Baptist Hymn Writers and Their Hymns*, Portland, Maine: Brown Thurston and Co., 1888, 332-33.

- 2 *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Dumas Malone, New York: Scribner's, 1935, 17:342-43; 18:114; 17:279-80.
- 3 *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, London: Macmillan, 1980, 11:748-50; Edwin M. Good, 'The Bible and American Music', in *The Bible and American Arts and Letters*, ed. Giles Gunn, Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983, 143.
- 4 *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20:484-85.
- 5 *Music in America*, ed. W. Thomas Marrocco and Harold Gleason, New York: Norton, 1964, 280; James J. Fuld, *The Book of World-Famous Music*, rev.ed. New York: Crown, 1971, 249-51; John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music*, 3rd rev.ed., New York: Crowell, 1954), 126-28; William Tuckman, "'America'", *New York Folklore Quarterly*, 24, 1968, 221-23; John Tasker Howard and George Kent Bellows, *A Short History of Music in America*, New York: Crowell, 1957, 97-98; S. F. Smith to Thomas W. Silloway, 21 January 1888, copy in Samuel Francis Smith Papers, Franklin Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Massachusetts. I am grateful to Diana Yount, Special Collections Librarian, and to her staff for making the Smith Papers available to me and for providing me with expert assistance during my visit to the Trask Library.
- 6 Charles Hamilton, 'Our Patriotic Songs', *Hobbies*, June 1954, 132.
- 7 Fuld, 251.
- 8 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer, Garden City, New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1969, 292-95.
- 9 Samuel Francis Smith Papers.
- 10 Copy in Samuel Francis Smith Papers.
- 11 S. F. Smith, *Sermon Occasioned by the Death of William Henry Harrison*, Hallowell, Maine: Glazier, Masters & Smith, 1841, 14-15.
- 12 Rush Welter, *The Mind of America 1820-1860*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1975, 259, 263, 273, 431.
- 13 Tocqueville, 295-98.
- 14 Welter, 271.
- 15 Samuel Francis Smith Papers.
- 16 Tuckman, 222.
- 17 *New York Times*, 23 January 1953, p.18.
- 18 Miriam Rossiter Small, *Oliver Wendell Holmes*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962, 75-76.
- 19 Eleanor M. Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat: A Biography of Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes*, New York: Henry Schuman, 1947, 324, 382.
- 20 *New York Times*, 16 January 1953, pp.1, 13; 23 January 1953, p.18; Tuckman, 226; *Christian Century*, 69, 1952, 1276-77; Donald E. Boles, *The Bible, Religion, and the Public Schools*, 2nd ed., Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1963, 176, 178, 179; Robert Michaelsen, *Piety in the Public School*, New York: Macmillan, 1970, 208, 209; Paul Blanchard, *Religion and the Schools: The Great Controversy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, 96. See also *Religion in Public Education*, ed. David E. Engel, New York: Paulist Press, 1974, and Thayer S. Warshaw, *Religion, Education, and the Supreme Court*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1979.
- 21 Samuel Francis Smith Papers.
- 22 Tuckman, 224-25.

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