

FRANCES BEVAN: TRANSLATOR OF GERMAN HYMNS

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MR. ANDREWS follows up his account of the Bevan family which appeared in *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY* for April-June, 1961, with a more detailed study of one of the most interesting members of the family—a study which also continues the theme of his earlier contribution on “Brethren Hymnology” (October-December, 1956).

I.

EMMMA FRANCES SHUTTLEWORTH (1827-1909) came of a distinguished clerical family. Her grandfather was Vicar of Kirkham in Lancashire; her father, the Rev. Philip Nicholas Shuttleworth (1782-1842), became Warden of New College, Oxford, and later Bishop of Chichester. In the death of Philip Shuttleworth, who had written several works against the Tractarians, Pusey thought that he saw a “token of God’s presence in the church of England”.

In spite of her father’s beliefs, Frances¹ was before her marriage a High Churchwoman. In 1856, however, she married R. C. L. Bevan (1809-90), who was head of the firm of bankers that towards the end of the century became Barclays Bank Limited. He came of Mixed Quaker and Low-Church stock and was a member of the Evangelical section of the Church of England. Soon after marriage Frances became associated with the “Open” section of the so-called Plymouth Brethren. Her religious convictions resembled those of her husband except that she felt obliged to withdraw more completely from the world than he did.²

In 1858 she published a collection of translations from the German entitled *Songs of Eternal Life*, a volume which, according to Julian’s *Dictionary of Hymnology*, received less attention than it deserved owing to its unusual size and comparative costliness.³ The following year she produced a similar work, *Songs of Praise for Christian Pilgrims*, and in 1884 yet another, *Service of Song in the House of the Lord*. The first series of *Hymns of Ter Steegen, Suso, and Others*⁴ appeared in November 1894, the second in April

¹ She seldom used her first name, Emma.

² On the history of the Bevan family see the present writer’s article in the *QUARTERLY* (xxxii, 1961, 81-92).

³ J. Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (2nd edn., 1907), s. v. “Bevan, Emma Frances”.

⁴ Mrs. Bevan always wrote the name, Tersteegen, as two words.

1897. These two volumes reprinted a number of hymns from the three previous collections, together with hymns that had been included in other works by Mrs. Bevan: namely, *Three Friends of God* (being mainly biographical studies of Johann Tauler, Nikolaus von Basel, and Heinrich Suso) (1887); *Sketches of the Quiet in the Land; or, Lights in the Dark Ages of Protestant Germany* (1891); and, finally, *Matelda and the Cloister of Hellfde* (being translations from the book of Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*) (1896). The details just given by no means exhaust the list of Mrs. Bevan's publications; but they cover everything relevant to the present study. The two Tersteegen volumes enjoyed more popularity than her earlier works; the publishers, Messrs. Nisbet & Co. reprinted them several times, and as late as 1920 another publisher, Messrs. Pickering & Inglis, considered it worth while to re-issue them again. Except where otherwise indicated, hymns quoted in this article were present in one of the two volumes.⁵ References to hymns in Mrs. Bevan's earlier collections were taken from Julian's *Dictionary*. Surprisingly, Julian did not mention the Tersteegen volumes.⁶

The greatest service that Mrs. Bevan rendered to the Church was the translating of German hymns into English. In her youth, while her father was Warden of New College, she became acquainted with the daughters of Chevalier Bunsen, whose *Versuch eines allgemeinen evangelischen Gesang- und Gebetbuchs* (1833) set out to be a national hymnal for the whole of Protestant Germany. With Bunsen's daughters she maintained until the end of her life a friendship, which no doubt stimulated her interest in German hymn-writers.⁷

At first sight it was not always easy to distinguish her own work from her translations. Like some other nineteenth-century Plymouth Brethren, she never copyrighted her hymns. She wrote often anonymously or simply over the initials "F.B." A number of her hymns gained a certain currency;⁸ but she did not always

⁵ The first series (*Hymns of Ter Steegen, Suso and Others*) will be hereafter cited as *Hymns of TS I*; the second (*Hymns of Ter Steegen and Others*), as *Hymns of TS II*. In references to these or other collections only the page on which a hymn begins will be given.

⁶ Even in his second (and most recent) edition (1907), the one cited throughout the present article; but he did refer to contemporary collections in which Mrs. Bevan's hymns were reprinted.

⁷ Mrs. N. H. Webster, *Spacious Days* [1950], pp. 42 and 91. This autobiography was written by one of Mrs. Bevan's daughters.

⁸ According to Julian, they came into "C[ommon] U[se]"; but this was probably an exaggeration.

receive the credit for them. A favourite device of hers was to use merely the initials of the house where she was staying when she wrote a hymn. Hymns signed in this way were almost certainly all her own compositions and not translations. Sometimes this practice led to confusion. The following composition found its way into a few hymnals:

'Midst the darkness, storm, and sorrow,
One bright gleam I see;
Well I know the blessed morrow
Christ will come for me.

'Midst the light, and peace, and glory
Of the Father's home,
Christ for me is watching, waiting,
Waiting till I come . . .⁹

The fact that these lines were signed "P.G." led to the belief that they were translated from the German hymnodist, Paul Gerhardt,¹⁰ since Mrs. Bevan normally signed translations with the initials of the original author. It is, however, virtually certain that these lines were an original composition written at the Bevans' London house Princes Gate.¹¹ Gerhardt wrote nothing that could have served as a basis for such a composition.

Another complication was that Mrs. Bevan preferred to convey the general sense of an original rather than to imitate it word for word. Often in the final version there was more of the translator than of the translated. In this she (probably unconsciously) was following the precedent of that first great translator of German

⁹ *Hymns of TS* I, 91. [A Gaelic version by the late Principal John Macleod, D.D., was published in the *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, January, 1958. ED.]

¹⁰ Thus in *The Believers' Hymn-Book* [1884]. *Hymns of Light and Love* [1900] ascribed the hymn to Tersteegen, presumably because Mrs. Bevan had translated so much from that writer. More cautiously, *Hymns for Christian Worship and Service* (1909) simply gave it as a translation by Mrs. Bevan. Each of these three hymnals is still in current use among the Brethren. The hymn in question is also included in *The Mitchley Hill Supplement* (1958), a supplement that is in use in a few Brethren assemblies.

¹¹ Other initials to be found in the *Hymns of TS* were: T. P., standing for the Bevans' house at Trent Park, East Barnet; F(osbury) M(anor, Wiltshire); V(illa) M(adeleine) C(annes); C(halet) P(assiflora) C(annes); W(ykeham) R(ise, Totteridge); P. B.; T. S. M.; S. B.; G. P. G. The first four of these identifications (together with that of Princes Gate for "P. G.") were provided by E. E. Cornwall (*Songs of Pilgrimage and Glory*, part II [1933], p. 61). That of Wykeham Rise was provided by the late Mrs. N. H. Webster (*Spacious Days*, p. 26). The remaining initials remain unidentified.

hymns into English, John Wesley. It was perhaps significant that she wrote a biography of him.¹²

Because of this paraphrastic practice a detailed textual comparison of her translations with their German originals was not thought to be of value in the present article. Instead, a general survey sufficed to illustrate the scope and quality of her work. Although she ranged over the centuries from the Middle Ages down to her own times, she had decided preferences.

II.

The Middle Ages was one of her favourite periods, for she felt attracted towards the Mystics. She was interested only in those "evangelical witnesses" of the Middle Ages, such as Mechthild von Magdeburg, Tauler, and Suso, who she believed differed fundamentally from writers like Thomas à Kempis who had remained under the influence of Roman Catholicism only. The latter writers, she held, strove to attain eternal life; the former rejoiced in its present possession.¹³ Whether or not one accepted this interpretation of Church history,¹⁴ one might be grateful to her for having made accessible to us a number of hymns of which no other English versions existed.

One of these Mystics, Mechthild von Magdeburg (c. 1210-c. 1280), saw visions, which she wrote down in a book entitled *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*. Extracts were translated by Mrs. Bevan, including sixteen hymns. One was a short poem headed by the translator with the text, I Chron. 12: 18:

'Twixt God and thee but love shall be;
 'Twixt earth and thee distrust and fear,
 'Twixt sin and thee shall be hate and war;
 And hope shall be 'twixt Heaven and thee
 Till night is o'er.¹⁵

Another poem, *The mind saith to the soul*, began with the same

¹² *John Wesley (True Stories of God's Servants)* [n.d.]. As S. H. Moore asserts, insufficient justice has been done to the art of paraphrase in hymnody (see his *Sursum Corda* [1956], pp. 32-4 and 96-8).

¹³ *Hymns of TS II*, Preface.

¹⁴ For a very different interpretation see G. W. Bromiley's review in *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY* (xxv, 1953, 124) of Suso's *Life of the Servant*, translated by James M. Clark (1952).

¹⁵ *Hymns of TS II*, 33; also in G. H. S. Price, *A Selection of Poems by Christian Authors* (1953), p. 235. W. E. Oliphant quoted several of Mrs. Bevan's translations from Mechthild, including this, in his *Story of German Song* (1909), pp. 21-7.

theme as that of Thomas Binney's hymn (*Eternal Light! Eternal Light!*), for Mrs. Bevan apostrophized the soul thus:

Soul, couldst thou abide for an hour alone
In the burning fire around His throne?

The soul, however, replied with all the assurance of a true Mystic,

The fish drowns not in the mighty sea,
The bird sinks not in the air,
The gold in the furnace fire may be,
And is yet more radiant there—

a speech that anticipated Francis Thompson's

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air . . . ?¹⁶

Two of the poems in the Tersteegen collection were from Gertrude von Helfde (1256-c. 1302), whose book, *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*, was said to be one of the finest literary products of Christian mysticism. Neither of the poems showed especial merit.

Heinrich Suso (c. 1300-66) was a Dominican, who had in his youth taken the Everlasting Wisdom depicted in the Salomonic Books as the object of his love and had later aimed at founding a Brotherhood of the Everlasting Wisdom. He and another Dominican, Johann Tauler (c. 1300-61), were amongst those loosely known as *Gottesfreunde*. Tauler studied under the famous Meister Eckhart and later became a great preacher.¹⁷ To these three men "religion was not institutional, priestly, ritualistic, but a personal experience of God's presence in the heart".¹⁸ In the two Tersteegen volumes twelve were by Suso, three by Tauler.

Here is the first stanza of Mrs. Bevan's version of one of Suso's poems:

Now have I seen Thee and found Thee,
For thou hast found Thy sheep;
I fled, but Thy love would follow—
I strayed, but Thy grace would keep.
Thou hast granted my heart's desire—
Most blest of the blessed is he
Who findeth no rest and no sweetness
Till he rests, O Lord, in Thee.¹⁹

¹⁶ *The mind saith to the soul* was reprinted in *Hymns of TS II*, 17. Binney lived 1798-1874, Thompson 1859-1907. Binney's hymn is in the *Methodist Hymn-Book* (1933), Thompson's in *Songs of Praise* (1931).

¹⁷ For information on the German mystics see the works by Professor James M. Clark, especially *The Great German Mystics* (1949), which deals with Eckhart, Tauler and Suso, and has an interesting discussion of the term *Gottesfreunde*.

¹⁸ F. J. Gillman, *The Evolution of the English Hymn* (1927), p. 129.

¹⁹ *Hymns of TS I*, 56; also Price, p. 226.

In 1885 a leaflet, entitled *A Praise Song*, was issued containing Mrs. Bevan's translations of five of Suso's poems, beginning with the one cited. Being set to "a sweet plaintive air by the late J. Revell," it became familiar to a large circle.^{19a} The last two lines of the poem were reminiscent of John Wesley's lines,

My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest it finds rest in Thee.²⁰

As an example of Tauler's work, the Quaker hymnologist, F. J. Gillman, quoted (in Mrs. Bevan's translation) the following poem, one "full of joy and trust in God's unfailing care":

As the bridegroom to his chosen,
As the king unto his realm,
As the keep unto the castle,
As the pilot to the helm,
So, Lord, art Thou to me . . .

As the sunshine to the heavens,
As the image to the glass,
As the fruit unto the fig-tree,
As the dew unto the grass,
So, Lord, art Thou to me.²¹

As another hymnologist, the Congregationalist Erik Routley, pointed out, every line was a picture; there were dozens of Sunday-school lessons within twenty-five lines.²² The poem was included in the Congregational hymnal, *School Worship*, which appeared in 1926. Neither Routley nor the compilers of the hymnal gave the name of the translator.

Before leaving the medieval Mystics one must mention, as a curio-piece, a poem, *O past are the feast-days — the Feast-day, the Feast-day is come*,²³ translated through the German from the Persian of Dschellaledin Rumi (1207-73).

III.

From the Reformation Mrs. Bevan chose little, and nothing from

^{19a} Cornwall, part II, p. 45. Oliphant quoted it, together with five other of Mrs. Bevan's translations from Suso (Oliphant, pp. 33-41).

²⁰ From *Thou hidden love of God, whose height, said to have been inspired by a sentence in St. Augustine's Confessions: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee"* (James Moffatt, *Handbook to the [Revised] Church Hymnary*, 1927, p. 157).

²¹ *Evolution of the English Hymn*, p. 129; also in *Hymns of TS I*, 52. Oliphant quoted it and two more of Mrs. Bevan's translations from Tauler (Oliphant, pp. 31-3). According to Gillman, the attribution of this poem to Tauler is uncertain.

²² *Hymns and Human Life* (1952), p. 261.

²³ *Songs of Eternal Life* (1858), p. 630.

the "father" of German vernacular hymnody, Martin Luther. His *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* appealed to a Thomas Carlyle but not to her. Most of the German hymns composed in the first half of the sixteenth century were marked by an "objective church piety", with the notable exception of those of the Bohemian Brethren. Mrs. Bevan gave us a hymn by one of them, Petrus Herbert (d. 1571), that has not otherwise been translated, *Lasst uns mit Lust und Freud aus Glauben singen*, rendered as *In faith we sing his song of faithfulness*.²⁴ From this period also she translated a hymn on the Second Advent by the Lutheran Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608), *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*. Catherine Winkworth's version, *Wake, awake, for night is flying*, is the best-known one of this. Mrs. Bevan's version begins, *Waken! from the tower it soundeth*.²⁵

IV.

The sufferings of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) stimulated the production of a more subjective and experimental type of hymn. The only one of the hymns by J. M. Meyfart (1590-1642) to pass into English was one on the New Jerusalem, *Jerusalem, du hochgebaute Stadt*. A number of people have essayed translations. The one by Mrs. Bevan began *Jerusalem! thou glorious city-height*.²⁶ Also of this period was the anonymous *Lasset Klag und Trauern fahren*, attributed to Johann Heermann, the author of the hymn paraphrased by Robert Bridges as *Ah, holy Jesu, how hast Thou offended*. The only English version of *Lasset Klag und Trauern fahren* is Mrs. Bevan's *I go from grief and sighing*.²⁷

Surprisingly, she gave us only two hymns by Paul Gerhardt (1607-76), the author of the Passion hymn, *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*, and the greatest German hymn-writer since Luther. Gerhardt was, she no doubt thought, sufficiently familiar to Englishmen through the renderings of John Wesley, Catherine Winkworth, and others. The two examples of Gerhardt's work selected by Mrs. Bevan were *Befiehl du deine Wege* (known to us thanks to Wesley as *Commit thou all thy griefs*) and *Ist Gott für mich, so trete*. Her version of the former hymn began *Commit thou all thy ways/*

²⁴ *Songs of EL*, p. 34; and *Hymns of TS II*, 92.

²⁵ *Songs of EL*, p. 1.

²⁶ *Songs of EL*, p. 19; and *Hymns of TS II*, 84.

²⁷ *Songs of EL*, p. 17; and *Hymns of TS II*, 82.

*And all thy grief and care,*²⁸ that of the latter hymn, *Is God for me? I fear not, though all against me rise*, of which the second stanza is as follows:

A Rock that stands for ever is Christ my Righteousness,
 And there I stand unfearing in everlasting bliss;
 No earthly thing is needful to this my life from Heaven,
 And nought of love is worthy, save that which Christ has given.
 Christ, all my praise and glory, my Light most sweet and fair,
 The ship wherein He saileth is scatheless everywhere;
 In Him I dare be joyful, a hero in the war,
 The judgment of the sinner affrighteth me no more.²⁹

According to Cornwall, these two translations by Mrs. Bevan, reprinted in large type on cards suitable for framing, found their way into many households.^{29a}

Mrs. Bevan certainly preferred (to use the German terms) *Ichlieder* to *Wirlieder*, that is, personal to congregational hymns; but she translated nothing from one of the most subjective and introspective German hymnodists, Johann Scheffler, otherwise known as Angelus Silesius (1624-77). A mystic, as she was herself, he was brought up as a Lutheran, but soon went over to the Roman Catholic Church and became involved in bitter controversy. Probably knowledge of his background (which nevertheless did not seem to affect most of his hymns) prevented her from translating any of them.

Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

(To be continued)

²⁸ *Songs of Praise for Christian Pilgrims* (1859), p. 124; and Cornwall, *Songs of Pilgrimage and Glory*, part II, p. 50 (the first four stanzas only).

²⁹ *Hymns of TS II*, 96; also *Songs of EL*, p. 39. Abridged versions appeared in *Believers' H-B, Hymn of Light and Love* (in both cases beginning with the above-quoted stanza), and *Hymns for Christian Worship*.

^{29a} These reprints of translations of *Befiehl du deine Wege* and *Ist Gott für mich* were entitled respectively, *The Lord our Shepherd* and *Song in the Day of the East Wind* (Cornwall, *loc. cit.*).