

CHARLOTTE ELLIOTT - A BRIGHTON HYMN WRITER

1789 - 1871

One Sunday evening recently after Benediction we sang the lovely hymn, 'Just as I am, without one plea'. I thought that perhaps some people might like to know a little bit about its author.

The Elliott family lived in Brighton for a large part of their lives. The family had moved there by 1823, living at Westfield Lodge. ******(I have not discovered where this was.) After Charlotte's mother's death in 1843, the family took 'a pleasant house in Regency Square'. The years between 1845 and 1857 were spent in Torquay on medical advice, but in 1857 it was decided that a more bracing climate was needed and a return was made to Brighton. Charlotte Elliott lived there from then until her death in 1871. Charlotte's brother, the Revd. Henry Venn Elliott, who was 'very tenderly attached to her', was the first minister of S. Mary's, Rock Gardens, and the founder in 1836 of S. Mary's Hall, a 'School for the Daughters of the Clergy'. In 1849 S. Mark's church was consecrated and was to be the sole church for the Hall. Henry Venn Elliott wrote: 'This was a great day in my life, on which the Lord granted me to see the topstone thus put to S. Mary's Hall'. Charlotte's cousin Emily, daughter of the Revd. E. B. Elliott, was born in Brighton and wrote a number of hymns for S. Mark's, among which many of you will know 'Thou didst leave thy throne and thy kingly crown' (E H 585; A & M 363), with its refrain:

'O come to my heart, Lord Jesus;
There is room in my heart for thee'.

Charlotte Elliott herself was from her early years an invalid. I am tempted to say, in the light of her longevity, that she 'enjoyed' ill health, but that might be unkind. In fact her sister does speak of Charlotte's ill health as a divine blessing. She

writes that before the family came to Brighton, Charlotte moved in circles where she met some of the most brilliant wits and writers of the day. But there was an absence of, or even hostility to, religion in those circles which caused God to protect her by 'being pleased to lay her on a bed of sickness' and thus 'withdraw her from the scene of danger and temptation.' Charlotte spent the rest of her life 'sinking' and 'rallying', and indeed wrote a number of 'deathbed' hymns and letters, and then recovered.

After one of these her sister Eleanor wrote: 'To the surprise of all, however, it pleased God that she should yet remain with us a little longer.....'. Charlotte outlived not only her parents, but also at least two sisters and a brother, dying in Brighton in 1871 at the age of eighty-two.



Charlotte Elliott

Indeed, the hymn 'Just as I am' itself was first published in 'The Invalid's Hymn Book', to various editions of which Charlotte Elliott contributed 112 hymns. A glance through the titles of her Selected

Poems can remind us of the prevalence of chronic invalidism in Victorian times, and the pervading presence of death: 'To the Passing Spirit', 'To a Mourner', 'On a Departed Friend', 'To a Widowed Friend', 'To One Bereaved of Many Relatives', 'On a Restless Night in Illness', 'To One whose Mind was Disordered by Grief', 'The Widowed Heart', 'By the Deathbed of a Friend', 'Hymn for a Dying Bed', 'Prayer for a Departing Spirit', 'In Sleeplessness or Pain' - and that is only a selection! 'Just as I am' was written in a summer-house in the grounds of S. Mary's Hall - a summer-house which in 1956 had been 'a familiar object in the school garden until recently'. Legend has it that there was a Bazaar in aid of S. Mary's Hall which Charlotte was not strong enough to attend, so she retired to the summer-house to write. Whether the occasion was actually retreat from a bazaar I cannot confirm, but I like the reminder that school and church fairs, fêtes and bazaars and other such fund-raising events seem always to have been a constituent of life; indeed, I am faintly surprised that they don't feature in the Acts of the Apostles.

Be its origin as it may, 'Just as I am' is a beautiful hymn, with two very lovely alternative settings: Saffron Walden (E H 316, A & M 120) and Misericordia (A & M 349). The structure repeated in each verse, with the qualifications of the writer's or singer's own unworthiness, or Christ's redeeming love, with parentheses, puts emphatic weight on the reiterated main theme: 'Just as I am O Lamb of God, I come!' The first stanza talks of the salvation of Christ's blood, the second and third of our uncertainties and insufficiencies, and the last three of Our Lord's promise and love. In the original version there was an extra stanza which was placed second, making an introduction, then three stanzas on our unworthiness, balanced by three on Christ's redeeming powers. It ran thus:

'Just as I am - and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot -
O Lamb of God, I come!'

Personally, I think it well that it was dropped; the rhyme is ugly, and it smacks rather too much of a Celestial dry-cleaners. William Wordsworth's daughter was much comforted on her deathbed by 'Just as I am'. Her widower wrote to Charlotte Elliott of the interest of his parents-in-law in the hymn:

'Mrs Wordsworth has told me that your hymn forms part of her daily solitary prayers. I do not think that Mr Wordsworth could bear to have it repeated aloud in his presence, but he is not the less sensible of the solace it gave his one and matchless daughter.'

Charlotte Elliott herself shall have the last word, with these stanzas taken from a poem of hers entitled 'The Hour of Prayer'.

'Blest is that tranquil hour of morn,
And blest that hour of solemn eve,
When on the wings of prayer up-borne,
The world I leave!

.....

Then is my strength by Thee renewed;
Then are my sins by Thee forgiven;
Then dost Thou cheer my solitude
With hope of heaven.

No words can tell what sweet relief
There for my every want I find,
What strength for warfare, balm for grief,
What peace of mind.'

Pamela James

Bibliography: Selected Poems of Charlotte Elliot
with a Memoir by her Sister.

Eileen E. Meades: A Brief History of
S. Mary's Hall, Brighton

