



## Classics in Short No.109

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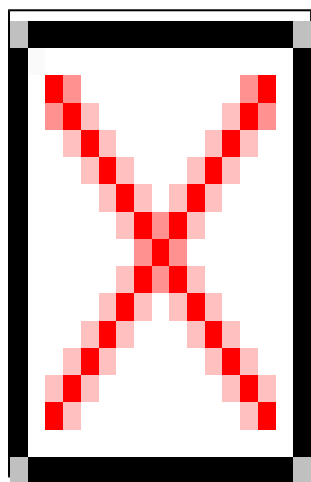
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Divine Songs for Children by Isaac Watts

**Brian Alderson** enjoys 'A Relish of Vertue and Religion' purveyed a long time ago in some **Divine Songs**.



### The Grolier Club

of New York City is a leading venue for book collectors and bibliographers. By the time you read this, it will just have concluded a big Christmas exhibition on the theme of **One Hundred Books Famous in Children's Literature** and there at no.6 in its chronological catalogue you will find one of the very few known copies (about four?) of the first edition of **Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children**, published three hundred years ago this year.

### A Classic therefore,

and indeed famous in its time, but not one much read today, unless by some earnest evangelists in the United States where it looks to be still in print. It was the work of Isaac Watts, who lived from 1684 to 1748, and was a pastor in the Puritan sect of the Independents. Although in his later years he claimed to have 'no Pretences to the Name of Poet', he was in his earlier ones very prolific, publishing in 1706 a three-book volume of 'poems chiefly of the lyric kind' and following that a year later with the variegated **Hymns and Spiritual Songs** which has led to him being celebrated as Britain's first hymnologist: 'Our God our help in ages past', 'When I survey the Wondrous Cross' and others are still being belted out in choirs and places where they sing.

### A man of tender sensibilities

and frail in health he nonetheless had an affection for children and a concern for their education and it was through this that he determined that they should have some devotional poetry of their own. **Divine Songs** was published in 1715,

dedicated to the three daughters of his wealthy patron, Sir Thomas Abney, with whose family he went to stay for a week while recovering from an illness. Never marrying, he stayed there for the remaining thirty-six years of his life.

### **The chief business**

of his book lies in the twenty-eight 'songs' with which it begins. No music was composed for them but tunes could be fitted since they were almost uniformly in 'ballad metre' – four-line stanzas with eight syllables followed by six usually rhyming throughout:

*How glorious is our Heavenly King,*

*Who reigns above the Sky!*

*How shall a Child presume to sing*

*His dreadful Majesty?*

Limited by such little-varied prosody and its constant theme of how to live the Christian (not to say Calvinistic) life Watts shaped the contents of his book in a noticeably orderly way: early poems in praise of God, dire warnings about Sin, some exemplary faults – 'Against Lying', 'Against Scoffing and calling Names' etc – until we return to two pairs of more prayerful effusions, 'Morning Song' and 'Evening Song', and the morning and evening of the Lord's Day. Perhaps feeling a need for variety (or for some fillers) Watts then adds some examples of metrical forms, a versified Ten Commandments, and what he calls 'a slight Specimen of Moral Songs without the Solemnities of Religion'. (With a changed metric, these two specimens must have been welcomed because he later added five more, prompting later publishers often to change his title to **Divine and Moral Songs**.)

### **If his endemic didacticism**

now seems hardly deservous of fame (and even less his Calvinistic threats of Devils visiting upon Sinners 'Darkness, Fire, and Chains' or the ugly self-satisfaction of being 'born of Christian Race and not a Heathen or a Jew?') then such blemishes were unexceptionable to Watts's audience. With no model to follow, he had created a new kind of children's book and one that found an enthusiastic market among the Protestant burghers (for he purposely sought both to speak to and for children and to avoid 'anything that savours of Party?'). Within a year a second edition was called for and by the time its publisher stopped counting in 1767 the book had reached a twenty-ninth, sustaining its copyright pretty well uninvaded until 1773.

### **Free of copyright**

and 'with all faults?', **Divine Songs** cut loose. It was already regarded as a classic (and has been feasibly seen as a piece of grit for the pearl that became **Songs of Innocence**) and through its ready availability it became one of the commercial building-blocks on which nineteenth century children's literature was founded. There are many testaments to the fame which brought it to the Grolier Club last year, not least the hundreds of editions from which one could write a small history of the Victorian book-trade. There were chapbooks, many pinching wood-engraved designs first made by Thomas Bewick in 1781; there were halfpenny versions no bigger than your thumb and a posh folio adorned with plates by such as Holman Hunt and Du Maurier; there was a pianoforte edition 'composed and adapted to music by Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven?'; and, to conclude the run, a pretty little art nouveau edition illustrated by Georgie Gaskin on the brink of the twentieth century.

### **What the children made of it all**

one cannot say; but there must have been many a pupil, condemned to reciting one or other of the **Songs** out loud, who must have relished the discomfiture of Alice in Wonderland trying the same thing who got her busy bees muddled with a crocodile, and her sluggard with a lobster. She too put in an appearance in New York and, incidentally, is this year just

half of three hundred years old.

An eminently detailed study of the book by J.H.P. Pafford, including two facsimiles, was published in 1971 in Oxford's **Juvenile Library**.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

Various editions of Isaac Watts's **Divine Songs for Children** are available in print and ebook.

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