

# *Hymns for Little Children:* The Life and Legacy of Cecil Frances Alexander

Vincent A. Lenti

Cecil Frances Alexander would appear to have earned a somewhat lasting place as a writer of Christian hymns. It is somewhat difficult to find a modern hymnal in which she is not represented. As an Anglican author, she is more heavily represented in hymn books of that tradition, but her works are also encountered in Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Roman Catholic publications.

Her reputation probably rests most heavily upon "Once in royal David's city," which has become popularly associated with the Ceremony of Lessons and Carols so widely celebrated during Advent and Christmas. Yet few people probably realize that this wonderfully simple and effective text was conceived by its author as a hymn for little children. Cecil Frances Alexander, a prolific author of hymn texts, was responsible for perhaps more than 400 hymns. Many of these were written for children, although later in life she turned towards producing hymns for the adult congregation. Yet it is through children's hymns that she achieved her greatest success and more lasting reputation.

## Early Life

Cecil Frances Alexander was born in 1818,<sup>1</sup> the third of seven children born to the family of Major John Humphreys and Elizabeth Reed. Quite probably because of the ambiguity of her first name, she was known to family and friends throughout her life as "Fanny." Her father was an Englishman who had served in the Royal Marines until he was seriously wounded in 1804. This war injury cost him most of his right arm, and he left the service in 1806, retiring on half pay. He married Elizabeth Reed in 1814 and eventually settled in Ireland, initially living in Dublin from 1818 to 1825. Although Humphreys never rose beyond the rank of First Lieutenant in the Royal Marines, for the

remainder of his life he was always referred to as "Major" Humphreys.

In 1825, when Fanny was seven years old, the Major moved his family to Ballykeane in County Wicklow where he had accepted an appointment as agent for William Howard, the 4th Earl of Wicklow. County Wicklow is located in eastern Ireland south of Dublin, a predominantly Roman Catholic area. Here Fanny first began to write poetry, and it was in County Wicklow that she befriended Lady Harriet Howard, the daughter of the Major's employer. Harriet quickly became her closest and dearest friend, a friendship which meant much to her for many years to come.

In 1833, however, Fanny was forced to leave the familiar and comfortable surroundings to which she had grown accustomed and to separate herself from daily contact with Harriet. Her father had responded to an opportunity to manage the estates of James Hamilton, the Marquis of Abercorn. These new responsibilities took the Major and his family to Strabane in County Tyrone, thus relocating Fanny and her family in the north of Ireland somewhat south of the city of Londonderry (Derry).

## Politics, Religion, and the Oxford Movement

Strabane was populated by many people of Scottish origin, and the general area in which it was located was heavily Protestant. Being of English origins, the Major and his family were Anglicans and belonged to what was then known as the Church of Ireland. This was the officially established church in Ireland, and, as such, it was supported by taxing the people of Ireland, Catholics as well as Protestants. A more enlightened leadership in England began to recognize the basic injustice of taxing three million Irish Catho-

<sup>1</sup>Various sources indicate 1823 as the year of her birth, but there seems to be little question that she was born in 1818. The later date may have been circulated following her marriage in 1850 to make it appear that she was closer in age to her husband, when in fact she was six years older.

*Vincent A. Lenti is a member of the piano faculty at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York, where he has served since 1963. He recently served as a member of the Editorial Advisory Board for THE HYMN.*

lics in support of an Anglican Church to which they did not belong. Fanny's arrival in Strabane occurred at the precise time when the British Parliament passed the Church Temporalities Act of 1833 which attempted to redress this injustice by reducing the number of Anglican archbishops and bishops in Ireland, thus reducing the tax burden on the predominantly Catholic population.

The Humphreys were directly affected by these changes, since Strabane was located in the Diocese of Raphoe, which was suppressed and merged with the Diocese of Derry by the Act of 1833. Like most good Anglicans of their time, they were outraged at what they viewed as an unjustified meddling in church affairs by the British Parliament. The importance of these events goes beyond simply forming an interesting backdrop to the story of Fanny Alexander, for the ensuing turmoil did much to formulate and strengthen her own specific religious beliefs and convictions (as well as those of the man who became her husband 17 years later).

A vigorous defense of the privileges of the Anglican Church arose at Oxford University. Among the leaders of this movement—generally known as the “Tractarian” or Oxford Movement—were John Henry Newman and John Keble. Newman was perhaps the more charismatic of the two, and his weekly sermons at St. Mary's Oxford (where he served as rector) were an inspiration to countless English men and women who revered the Anglican Church and its traditions and privileges. His eventual conversion to the Roman Catholic faith created a sense of dismay among many who had looked towards him as their leader. Nonetheless, his forward-looking ideas and the brilliance of his mind continued to exercise a widely felt influence in both Catholic and Anglican circles.

If Newman had somehow betrayed the Anglican Church, Keble remained faithful. He was Professor of Poetry at Oxford, and among his many literary accomplishments was a highly popular and influential collection of religious verse entitled *The Christian Year*. Fanny was among the many ardent admirers of these poems and is said to have committed them all to memory. Raised as a strong evangelical Anglican, she was more and more attracted to Keble's “high church” views and eventually came to be strongly identified with this branch of Anglicanism.

### Literary Recognition and Marriage

As the years passed, Fanny became more and more involved with the church. Even as a young girl in Wicklow she had assisted in the teaching of Sunday school classes. This activity intensified during her years at Strabane. In addition, she continued to write poetry, and during the latter half of the 1840s published four collections of her verse in four years. The first of these, which

appeared in 1846, was entitled *Verses for Holy Seasons*. It was dedicated to John Keble and consisted of junior versions of “The Christian Year” suitably rewritten for use by Sunday school teachers. The following year, Fanny published *The Lord of the Forest and His Vassals*. This was followed in 1848 by *Hymns for Little Children* and in 1849 by *Moral Songs*.

The publication of *Verses for Holy Seasons* in 1846 coincided with an event of great sadness for its young author: her dear friend Harriet Howard died of tuberculosis. This terrible loss was followed a year and a half later by the death of Archer Butler, a young clergyman with whom Fanny had fallen in love. At the age of 30, she was probably considered somewhat beyond marriageable age, making Butler's sudden death all the more tragic for her.

One year later, however, she was introduced to the William Alexander, and, after a suitable courtship, they were married on October 15, 1850. Her new husband was six years younger, having been born in 1824. His father, Robert Alexander, was a rather undistinguished Anglican priest, and his mother, Dorothy McClintock, was of Scotch Presbyterian heritage. Robert and Dorothy Alexander sent their son to Oxford where he achieved a genuinely miserable academic record and was persistently in debt. While at Oxford he became enchanted by John Henry Newman and announced to his horrified parents that he intended to convert to Roman Catholicism. Abruptly changing his mind, he was ordained an Anglican deacon and assigned to St. Columb's Cathedral in Londonderry. At the time he married Fanny, he was rector of Termonamongan at Killeter, near Castleterg in County Tyrone, one of the more remote country parishes in the Diocese of Derry. As happy as the Major and his wife must have been to see their daughter finally married, her new husband gave no indication whatsoever of the brilliant career which he would eventually have in the Anglican Church.

### From Rectory to Bishop's Palace

For the next 17 years, Fanny led a life typical for the wife of an Anglican clergyman. William held positions at a number of different churches in Northern Ireland. In 1855 the Alexanders left Termonamongan for a new parish assignment in Upper Fahan, County Donegal, only seven miles from Londonderry. Five years later William was appointed rector of Camus-juxta-Mourne, and his parish included Strabane where Fanny had lived in her youth and where her parents still resided. During these years, Fanny bore three children. Robert Jocelyn was born in 1852, while the Alexanders were in Termonamongan. Cecil John was born in 1855, shortly after their arrival in Upper Fahan, to be followed two years later by Eleanor Jane.

During these years of serving as wife and

mother, Fanny continued to write poems and hymns, turning her attention to writing for adults shortly after Robert Jocelyn was born. She was certainly not atypical for her era in showing a talent for writing religious verse. Poetry was a popular pastime for Victorian women, and Fanny was distinguished not by her interest but by her success as a writer of religious verse. As an author she now identified herself as "Mrs. C.F. Alexander," and it is under this name that so many of her hymns came to be included in various hymn collections.

William's growing success and effectiveness as a pastor did not escape notice by the leadership of the Anglican Church, and he was rewarded in 1867 by being selected as the new Bishop of Derry. William's position returned him to St. Columb's Cathedral in Londonderry, where he had first served as deacon following his ordination. In the years to follow, Fanny Alexander served with distinction as the "bishop's wife" and earned the respect and affection of all who came to know her. In September 1895, 28 years after William's appointment as Bishop, Fanny Alexander suffered a stroke. She died a month later, on October 12, 1895, at the age of 77. The following spring William was elected Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland. Those who had known him in his youth could not have foreseen the brilliant and successful career which this poor student and irresponsible young man would eventually achieve. It is a pity that his devoted wife, who undoubtedly provided a positive and steady influence during their long married life, was not able to share this final chapter in his distinguished career.

### Three Hymns of Cecil Frances Alexander

Fanny Alexander's continuing reputation as a hymnwriter rests on a handful of works which have survived in modern hymnals, especially three which originally appeared in *Hymns for Little Children*. These three are "All things bright and beautiful," "Once in royal David's city," and "There is a green hill far away." Each of them represents an effort to explain for children an article of the Apostles' Creed. These three hymns are no longer considered to be "children's hymns," but have passed into the general repertoire for congregational singing.

"All things bright and beautiful"<sup>2</sup> is an explanation of the opening clause of the creed, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Depicting God the Creator would be one of the easier tasks among the various articles of the Apostles' Creed, since the fruits of creation are so plentifully visible and easily understood. Therefore, Fanny Alexander's text simply points to the evidence of the Father's "making" of heaven and earth:

<sup>1</sup>All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful,  
The Lord God made them all.

<sup>2</sup>Each little flower that opens,  
Each little bird that sings,  
He made their glowing colours,  
He made their tiny wings.

<sup>3</sup>The rich man in his castle,  
the poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

<sup>4</sup>The purple-headed mountain,  
The river running by,  
The sunset and the morning,  
That brightens up the sky;

<sup>5</sup>The cold wind in the winter,  
The pleasant summer sun,  
The ripe fruits in the garden,  
He made them every one.

<sup>6</sup>The tall trees in the greenwood,  
The meadows where we play,  
The rushes by the water,  
We gather every day.

<sup>7</sup>He gave us eyes to see them,  
And lips that we might tell  
How great is God Almighty,  
Who has made all things well.

The third stanza is generally omitted in modern hymnals. There are those who feel that it shows the influence of Fanny's Calvinist upbringing and speaks with a somewhat dated vision of society. And, for apparently no particular reason, the sixth stanza is also frequently omitted. However, even as a shortened, five-stanza hymn, "All things bright and beautiful" presents a refreshing and delightful vision of creation, one which can be readily appreciated by all, regardless of age.

"Once in royal David's city"<sup>3</sup> is perhaps Fanny Alexander's best-known hymn and represents her interpretation for children of the clause "I believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who was born of the virgin Mary."

<sup>1</sup>Once in royal David's city  
Stood a lowly cattle shed,  
Where a Mother laid her Baby,  
In a manger for His bed;  
Mary was that Mother mild,  
Jesus Christ her little Child.

<sup>2</sup>He came down to earth from Heaven  
Who is God and Lord of all,  
And His shelter was a stable,  
And His cradle was a stall;  
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,  
Lived on earth our Saviour Holy.

<sup>3</sup>And, through all His wondrous Childhood,  
He would honour and obey,  
Love, and watch the lowly Maiden,

<sup>2</sup> See *The Hymnal 1982* #405 (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), *The Presbyterian Hymnal* #267 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), *The United Methodist Hymnal* #147 (Nashville, Tenn.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), *The Baptist Hymnal* #46 (The Convention Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1991), *Worship* #505 (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, 1986), or *The Collegeville Hymnal* #594 (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Hymnal 1982* #102, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* #49, *The United Methodist Hymnal* #250, *Worship* #402, or *The Collegeville Hymnal* #212.

In whose gentle arms He lay;  
Christian children all must be  
Mild, obedient, good as he.

<sup>4</sup>For He is our childhood's pattern.  
Day by day like us He grew,  
He was little, weak, and helpless,  
Tears and smiles like us He knew;  
And He feelieth for our sadness,  
And he shareth in our gladness.

<sup>5</sup>And our eyes at last shall see Him,  
Through His own redeeming love,  
For that Child so dear and gentle  
Is our Lord in Heav'n above;  
And he leads His children on  
To the place where He is gone.

<sup>6</sup>Not in that poor lowly stable,  
With the oxen standing by,  
We shall see Him; but in Heaven,  
Set at God's right hand on high;  
When like stars His children crown'd  
All in white shall wait around.

In spite of its widespread popularity, this hymn has been subjected to more than the usual amount of editing and rewriting. As a result, the text may differ from one hymnal to another. The third stanza, in particular, has not found favor with modern editors. Some feel that it is too easily identified as a text written for children. Therefore, several hymnals, including *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, simply omit it. Its greater fault, however, is the perception that it is somehow unsuitable for modern children because of its insistence that children *must* be mild, obedient, and good. The Roman Catholic hymnal, *Worship*, avoids telling children what they must do by substituting the word "should" for "must." By contrast, the editors of *The Hymnal 1982* apparently felt that the original third stanza was beyond redemption and replaced it with an entirely new one written by James Waring McCrady.

In addition, other parts of the text were altered so as to remove some of the wonderful child-like simplicity of the original. For example, in stanza four we learn that Jesus was "tempted, scorned, rejected" instead of "little, weak, and helpless." And after having removed the adjective "helpless" from the fourth stanza, an editorial change has curiously inserted it back into the fifth stanza, where the line "For that Child so dear and gentle" is changed to "For that child who seemed so helpless."

Fanny Alexander, like most authors, disapproved of tampering with texts. Her husband made this perfectly clear in his preface to a collection of her poems.

She disliked, with amusing intensity, changes made in hymns to suit a fitful fancy or to humour party spirit. She looked upon the thing as literary sacrilege—sacrilege against the dead in that which was best and noblest of them.<sup>4</sup>

Many hymnals also omit the sixth stanza of "Once in royal David's city." The hymn text does have a reasonably firm sense of conclusion at the end of the fifth, and the sixth stanza may be viewed as an unnecessary elaboration. Yet one has to question why editors do not simply leave Fanny Alexander's text alone. It is a wonderful hymn, and the changes do little if anything to improve upon it.

"There is a green hill far away,"<sup>5</sup> an interpretation of the phrase "Suffered under Pontius Pilate," is perhaps less widely known and appreciated than "All things bright and beautiful" and "Once in royal David's city." Nonetheless, it may be one of Fanny Alexander's finest and most effective texts for children:

<sup>1</sup>There is a green hill far away,  
Without a city wall,  
Where the dear Lord was crucified,  
Who died to save us all.

<sup>2</sup>We may not know, we cannot tell  
What pains He had to bear,  
But we believe it was for us  
He hung and suffer'd there.

<sup>3</sup>He died that we might be forgiven,  
He died to make us good,  
That we might go at last to Heav'n,  
Saved by His precious Blood.

<sup>4</sup>There was no other good enough  
To pay the price of sin,  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of Heav'n, and let us in.

<sup>5</sup>Oh dearly, dearly has He loved,  
And we must love Him too,  
And trust in His redeeming Blood,  
And try His works to do.

It was a particular challenge to describe for children the suffering of Christ. In dealing with the subject, Fanny Alexander's vision of the barren hills of Judea was said to be prompted by a hill near her home which she frequently passed while riding in her carriage. But her text is less a physical description of Calvary than a basic lesson in the theology of redemption. Her language is simple and direct, but the message that "he died that we might be forgiven" is unmistakably clear. The text deserves to be more widely known and appreciated.

Only a few of Fanny Alexander's other hymns for children have survived in modern hymnals. One which might be encountered is her Easter hymn, "He is risen."<sup>6</sup> The text for this hymn was originally included in *Verses for Holy Seasons* (1846), her adaptation of Keble's *The Christian Year*. Another text inspired by Keble is the Ascension hymn "Up in heaven, up in heaven,"<sup>7</sup> although it has been generally overlooked by recent American hymn book editors. Of her hymns for adults, only "I bind unto myself today"<sup>8</sup> is found with any frequency.

<sup>4</sup>C.F. Alexander, *Poems*, xvii.

<sup>5</sup>See *The Hymnal 1982* #167 or *Lutheran Book of Worship* #114 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>See *The Hymnal 1982* #180, *The Baptist Hymnal* #166, or *The Collegeville Hymnal* #285.

<sup>7</sup>See *Hymns Ancient and Modern* #565 (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1924), Standard Edition.

<sup>8</sup>See *The Hymnal 1982* #370, *Lutheran Book of Worship* #188, *Lutheran Worship* #172, or *The Collegeville Hymnal* #305.

## Final Assessment

It is interesting to speculate what characteristics made Fanny Alexander more successful as an author of children's hymns. The principal reason may be that, in writing for children, she was compelled to speak with simplicity and with a particularly careful choice of vocabulary and imagery. In doing so, she may have avoided the sentimentality and other excesses which often characterize Victorian hymns. Her children needed a clear and concise message, and she had to respond to that need. This is not to suggest that she was always successful. Among her *Hymns for Little Children* was one entitled "Within the churchyard, side by side,"<sup>9</sup> which may rank as one of the worst hymns from Victorian England:

<sup>1</sup>Within the churchyard, side by side,  
Are many long low graves;  
And some have stones set over them,  
On some the green grass waves.

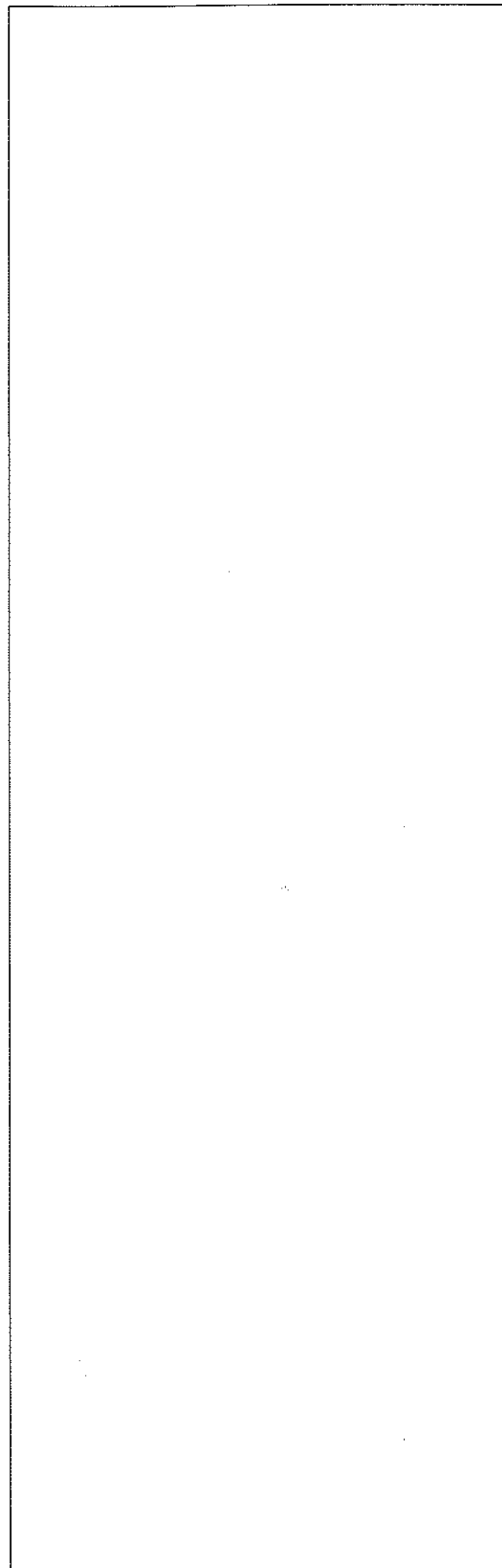
<sup>2</sup>Full many a little Christian child,  
Woman, and man lies there;  
And we pass near them every time  
When we go in to prayer.

<sup>3</sup>They cannot hear our footsteps come,  
They do not see us pass;  
They cannot feel the warm bright sun,  
That shines upon the grass.

<sup>4</sup>They do not hear when the great bell  
Is ringing overhead;  
They cannot rise and come to Church,  
With us, for they are dead.

It is difficult to imagine a Sunday school class of children singing this rather awful hymn, particularly the fourth stanza. Fortunately, hymns of greater value established Fanny Alexander's reputation as one of the more important nineteenth-century hymn writers—and certainly one of the most successful writers of children's hymns.

The value of Fanny Alexander's hymns, successful and unsuccessful alike, may ultimately rest on the simple fact that most of her texts were credal in nature. She most often wrote to explain something essential in Christian belief, to answer and address basic questions of faith rather than describing feelings and religious experiences. In choosing to explain essential doctrines, Fanny Alexander dealt with matters no less pertinent today than when written. Her texts were always an expression of her own simple piety. The continued use of several of her hymns—particularly "All things bright and beautiful," "Once in royal David's city," and "There is a green hill far away"—is an appropriate testimony to her talent and to her dedication to those basic Christian values which guided her throughout her long and exemplary life. ■



<sup>9</sup>For the complete hymn text of eight stanzas, see *Hymns Ancient and Modern* #575.