

Classic Poetry Series

Henry Francis Lyte
- poems -

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Henry Francis Lyte(1 June 1793 - 20 November 1847)

Henry Francis Lyte was a Scottish Anglican divine and hymn-writer.

Biography

Henry Francis Lyte was born to Thomas and Anna Maria Lyte on a farm at Ednam, near Kelso, Scotland. Thomas deserted the family shortly after making arrangements for his two oldest sons to attend Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh; and Anna moved to London, where both she and her youngest son died.

The headmaster at Portora, Dr. Robert Burrowes, recognized Henry Lyte's ability, paid the boy's fees, and "welcomed him into his own family during the holidays." Lyte was effectively an adopted son.

Religious Conversion

After studying at Trinity College, Dublin and with very limited training for the ministry, Lyte took Anglican holy orders in 1815, and for some time he held a curacy in Taghmon near Wexford. Lyte's "sense of vocation was vague at this early stage. Perhaps he felt an indefinable desire to do something good in life." However, in about 1816, Lyte experienced an evangelical conversion. In attendance on a dying priest, the latter convinced Lyte that both had earlier been mistaken in not having taken the Epistles of St. Paul "in their plain and literal sense." Lyte began to study the Bible "and preach in another manner," following the example of four or five local clergymen whom he had previously laughed at and considered "enthusiastic rhapsodists."

Early Career and Marriage

In 1817 Lyte became a curate in Marazion, Cornwall, and there met and married Anne Maxwell, daughter of a well-known Scottish-Irish family. She was 31, seven years older than her husband and a "keen Methodist." Furthermore, she "could not match her husband's good looks and personal charm." Nevertheless, the marriage was happy and successful. Ann eventually made Lyte's situation more comfortable by contributing her family fortune, and she was an excellent manager of the house and finances. They had two daughters and three sons, one of whom was the chemist and photographer Farnham Maxwell-Lyte.

From 1820 to 1822 the Lytes lived in Sway, Hampshire. Itself only five miles

from the sea, the house in Sway was the only one the couple shared during their marriage that was neither on a river or by the sea. At Sway Lyte lost a month-old daughter and wrote his first book, later published as *Tales In Verse Illustrative of the Several Petitions of the Lord's Prayer* (1826). In 1822 the Lytes moved to Dittisham, Devon, on the River Dart and then, after Lyte had regained some measure of health, to the small parish of Charleton.

Brixham

About April 1824, Lyte left Charleton for Lower Brixham, a Devon fishing village. Almost immediately, Lyte joined the schools committee, and two months later he became its chairman. Also in 1824, Lyte established the first Sunday school in the Torbay area and created a Sailors' Sunday School. Although religious instruction was given there, the primary object of both was educating children and seamen for whom other schooling was virtually impossible. Each year Lyte organized an Annual Treat for the 800-1000 Sunday school children, which included a short religious service followed by tea and sports in the field.

Shortly after Lyte's arrival in Brixham, the minister attracted such large crowds that the church had to be enlarged—the resulting structure later described by his grandson as "a hideous barn-like building." Lyte added to his clerical income by taking resident pupils into his home, including the blind brother of Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, later British prime minister.

Character and Personality

Lyte was a tall and "unusually handsome" man, "slightly eccentric but of great personal charm, a man noted for his wit and human understanding, a born poet and an able scholar." He was an expert flute player and according to his great-grandson always had his flute with him. Lyte spoke Latin, Greek, and French; enjoyed discussing literature; and was knowledgeable about wild flowers. At a former military hospital at Berry Head, Lyte built a magnificent library—largely of theology and old English poetry—described in his obituary as "one of the most extensive and valuable in the West of England."

Nevertheless, Lyte was also able to identify with his parish of fishermen, visiting them at their homes and on board their ships in harbor, supplying every vessel with a Bible, and compiling songs and a manual of devotions for use at sea. In theology Lyte was a conservative evangelical who believed that that man's nature was totally corrupt. Lyte frequently rose at 6 AM and prayed for two or more hours before breakfast.

In politics, Lyte was a Conservative who feared revolt among the irreligious poor. He publicly opposed Catholic Emancipation by speaking against it in several Devon towns, stating that he preferred Catholics to be "emancipated from priests and from the power of the factious and turbulent demagogues of Ireland." Lyte, a friend of Samuel Wilberforce, also opposed slavery, organizing an 1833 petition to Parliament requesting it be abolished in Great Britain.

Decline and Death

In poor health throughout his life, Lyte suffered various respiratory illnesses and often visited continental Europe in attempts to check their progress. In 1835 Lyte sought appointment as the vicar of Crediton but was rejected because of his increasingly debilitating asthma and bronchitis. In 1839, when only 46, Lyte wrote a poem entitled "Declining Days." Lyte also grew discouraged when numbers of his congregation (including in 1846, nearly his entire choir) left him for Dissenter congregations, especially the Plymouth Brethren, after Lyte expressed High Church sympathies and leaned toward the Oxford Movement.

By the 1840s, Lyte was spending much of his time in the warmer climates of France and Italy, making written suggestions about the conduct of his family's financial affairs after his death. When his daughter was married to his senior curate, Lyte did not perform the ceremony. Lyte complained of weakness and incessant coughing spasms, and he mentions medical treatments of blistering, bleeding, calomel, tartar emetic, and "large doses" of Prussic acid. Yet his friends found him buoyant, cheerful, and keenly interested in affairs of the Europe around him. Lyte spent the summer of 1847 at Berry Head then, after one final sermon to his congregation on the subject of the Holy Communion, he left again for France. He died at Nice on November 20, 1847, where he was buried.

Works

Lyte's first composition was *Tales in Verse illustrative of Several of the Petitions in the Lord's Prayer* (1826), written at Lymington and commended by John Wilson in the *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Lyte next published *Poems, chiefly Religious* (1833), and in 1834, a small collection of psalms and hymns entitled *The Spirit of the Psalms*. After his death, a volume of *Remains* (1850) with a memoir was issued, and the poems contained in this, with those in *Poems, chiefly Religious*, were afterward published in one volume (1868). Three of Lyte's best-known hymns are paraphrases of psalms, published in *The Spirit of the Psalms*: "Praise, my soul, the King of heaven" (Psalm 103), "God of Mercy, God of Grace" (Psalm 67), and "Pleasant are thy courts above" (Psalm 84).

<i>Lyte's best known hymns are:
Abide with me! fast falls the eventide
Jesus, I my cross have taken
Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven
Pleasant are Thy courts above.</i>

Of these hymns, "Abide With Me" is the best known. According to the traditional story given in the Remains, Lyte wrote it a few hours after conducting the final service at his church, which was probably 5 September 1847. More likely the hymn was actually written in July or August of that year. Lyte himself created for the hymn what his biographer has disparaged as "a dull tune." When Hymns Ancient and Modern was published in 1861, the editor, William H. Monk—whose three-year-old daughter had just died—composed his own tune, "Eventide," for Lyte's poem. The hymn became a favorite of George V and George VI and was sung at the former's funeral. The hymn also inspired Field Marshal Herbert Kitchener and General Charles "Chinese" Gordon, and it was said to have been on the lips of Edith Cavell as she faced a German firing squad. "Abide with Me" has been sung at the FA Cup finals since 1927 when the association secretary substituted the hymn for the playing of "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

Significance

Leon Litvack has written in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography that although Lyte's "poetic energies were directed at scripturally and evangelically minded audiences, his lyric gift was universally appreciated. The example of 'Abide with me' is instructive: intensely personal and contemplative, yet nationally popular—even being sung (always, after its publication in 1861, to W. H. Monk's tune, 'Eventide') on secular occasions such as at football matches, and especially, since 1927, at the English cup final." The 20th-century hymnologist Erik Routley referred to the "much-loved H. R. Lyte" who "though scriptural and evangelical in his emphases, always writes good literature and is rarely deserted by an exquisite lyric gift. Perhaps the centrally 'romantic' hymn of all hymns is the intensely personal yet, as it has proved, wholly universal hymn, 'Abide with me.'"

A Lost Love

I meet thy pensive, moonlight face;
Thy thrilling voice I hear;
And former hours and scenes retrace,
Too fleeting, and too dear!

Then sighs and tears flow fast and free,
Though none is nigh to share;
And life has nought beside for me
So sweet as this despair.

There are crush'd hearts that will not break;
And mine, methinks, is one;
Or thus I should not weep and wake,
And thou to slumber gone.

I little thought it thus could be
In days more sad and fair
That earth could have a place for me,
And thou no longer there.

Yet death cannot our hearts divide,
Or make thee less my own:
Twere sweeter sleeping at thy side
Than watching here alone.

Yet never, never can we part,
While Memory holds her reign:
Thine, thine is still this wither'd heart,
Till we shall meet again.

Henry Francis Lyte

Abide With Me

Abide with us: for it is towards evening, and the day is far spent. -- Luke xxiv.29

Abide with me! Fast falls the Eventide;
The darkness thickens. Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me!

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away:
Change and decay in all around I see.
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!

Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word;
But as Thou dwellest with thy disciples, Lord,
Familiar, condescending, patient, free, --
Come, not to sojourn, but abide with me.

Come not in terrors, as the King of kings;
But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings,
Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea.
Come, Friend of sinners and thus abide with me.

Thou on my head in early youth did smile,
And though rebellious and perverse meanwhile,
Thou hast not left me, oft as I left Thee.
On to the close, O Lord, abide with me!

I need thy presence every passing hour.
What but thy grace can foil the Tempter's power?
Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O, abide with me!

I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? where grave thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold then thy cross before my closing eyes;
Speak through the gloom, and point me to the skies.
Heaven's morning breaks, and Earth's vain shadows flee!
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!

Henry Francis Lyte

Declining Days

Why do I sigh to find
Life's evening shadows gathering round my way?
The keen eye dimming, and the buoyant mind
Unhinging day by day?

Is it the natural dread
Of that stern lot, which all who live must see?
The worm, the clay, the dark and narrow bed, --
Have these such awe for me?

Can I not summon pride
To fold, my decent mantle round my breast;
And lay me down at Nature's eventide,
Calm to my dreamless rest?

As nears my soul the verge
Of this dim continent of woe and crime,
Shrinks she to hear Eternity's long surge
Break o'er the shores of time?

Asks she, how shall she fare
When conscience stands before the judge's throne,
And gives her record in, and all shall there
Know, as they all are known?

A solemn scene and time --
And well may Nature quail to feel them near --
But grace in feeble breasts can work sublime,
And faith overmaster fear!

Hark I from that throne comes down
A voice which strength to sinking souls can give,
That voice all judgment's thunders cannot drown;
'Believe,' it cries, 'and live.'

Weak-sinful, as I am,
That still small voice forbids me to despond
Faith clings for refuge to the bleeding Lamb,
Nor dreads the gloom beyond. --

'Tis not, then, earth's delights
From which my spirit feels so loath to part;
Nor the dim future's solemn sounds or sights,
That press so on my heart.

No I 'tis the thought that I --
My lamp so low, my sun so nearly set,
Have lived so useless, so unmissed should lie
'Tis this, I now regret. --

I would not be the wave,
That swells and ripples up to yonder shore
That drives impulsive on, the wild wind's slave,
And breaks, and is no more! --

I would not be the breeze,
That murmurs by me in its viewless play,
Bends the light grass, and flutters in the trees,
And sighs and flits away! --

No I not like wave or wind
Be my career across the earthly scene
To come and go, and leave no trace behind,
To say that I have been.

I want not vulgar fame --
I seek not to survive in brass or stone
Hearts may not kindle when they hear my name,
Nor tears my value own. --

But might I leave behind
Some blessing for my fellows, some fair trust
To guide, to cheer, to elevate my kind
When I am in the dust.

Within my narrow bed,
Might I not wholly mute or useless be;
But hope that they, who trampled o'er my head,
Drew still some good from me!

Might my poor lyre but give

Some simple strain, some spirit-moving lay;
Some sparklet of the soul, that still might live
When I have passed to clay! --

Might verse of mine inspire
One virtuous aim, one high resolve impart;
Light in one drooping soul a hallowed fire,
Or bind one broken heart. --

Death would be sweeter then,
More calm my slumber 'neath the silent sod;
Might I thus live to bless my fellow-men,
Or glorify my God.

Why do we ever lose,
As judgment ripens, our diviner powers
Why do we only learn our gifts to use,
When they no more are ours?

O Thou whose touch can lend
Life to the dead, Thy quick'ning grace supply,
And grant me, swanlike, my last breath to spend
In song that may not die!

Henry Francis Lyte

Far From My Heavenly Home

Far from my heavenly home,
Far from my Father's breast,
Fainting I cry, blest Spirit, come
And speed me to my rest.

My spirit homeward turns
And fain would thither flee;
My heart, O Zion, droops and yearns,
When I remember thee.

To thee, to thee I press,
A dark and toilsome road;
When shall I pass the wilderness,
And reach the saint's abode?

God of my life, be near;
On Thee my hopes I cast:
O guide me through the desert here,
And bring me home at last.

Henry Francis Lyte

God Of Mercy, God Of Grace

God of mercy, God of grace,
Show the brightness of Thy face:
Shine upon us, Saviour, shine,
Fill Thy church with light Divine;
And Thy saving health extend,
Unto earth's remotest end.

Let Thy people praise Thee, Lord;
Be by all that live adored;
Let the nations shout and sing,
Glory to their Saviour King;
At Thy feet their tributes pay,
And Thy holy will obey.

Let the people praise Thee, Lord;
Earth shall then her fruits afford;
God to man His blessing give,
Man to God devoted live;
All below, and all above,
One in joy, and light, and love.

Henry Francis Lyte

Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken

Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee.
Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou from hence my all shall be.
Perish every fond ambition, all I've sought or hoped or known.
Yet how rich is my condition! God and heaven are still mine own.

Let the world despise and leave me, they have left my Savior, too.
Human hearts and looks deceive me; Thou art not, like them, untrue.
And while Thou shalt smile upon me, God of wisdom, love and might,
Foes may hate and friends disown me, show Thy face and all is bright.

Go, then, earthly fame and treasure! Come, disaster, scorn and pain!
In Thy service, pain is pleasure; with Thy favor, loss is gain.
I have called Thee, "Abba, Father"; I have set my heart on Thee:
Storms may howl, and clouds may gather, all must work for good to me.

Man may trouble and distress me, 'twill but drive me to Thy breast.
Life with trials hard may press me; heaven will bring me sweeter rest.
Oh, 'tis not in grief to harm me while Thy love is left to me;
Oh, 'twere not in joy to charm me, were that joy unmixed with Thee.

Take, my soul, thy full salvation; rise o'er sin, and fear, and care;
Joy to find in every station something still to do or bear:
Think what Spirit dwells within thee; what a Father's smile is thine;
What a Savior died to win thee, child of heaven, shouldst thou repine?

Haste then on from grace to glory, armed by faith, and winged by prayer,
Heaven's eternal day's before thee, God's own hand shall guide thee there.
Soon shall close thy earthly mission, swift shall pass thy pilgrim days;
Hope soon change to glad fruition, faith to sight, and prayer to praise.

Henry Francis Lyte

Long Did I Toil

Long did I toil, and knew no earthly rest,
Far did I rove, and found no certain home;
At last I sought them in His sheltering breast,
Who opes His arms, and bids the weary come:
With Him I found a home, a rest divine,
And since then I am His, and He is mine.

The good I have is from His stores supplied,
The ill is only what He deems the best;
He for my Friend, I'm rich with naught beside,
And poor without Him, though of all possessed:
Changes may come, I take, or I resign,
Content, while I am His, while He is mine.

Whate'er may change, in Him no change is seen,
A glorious Sun that wanes not nor declines;
Above the clouds and storms He walks serene,
And on His people's inward darkness shines:
All may depart—I fret not, nor repine,
While I my Savior's am, while He is mine.

While here, alas! I know but half His love,
But half discern Him, and but half adore;
But when I meet Him in the realms above,
I hope to love Him better, praise Him more,
And feel, and tell, amid the choir divine,
How fully I am His, and He is mine.

Henry Francis Lyte

My God, My King, Thy Praise I Sing

My God, my King, Thy praise I sing,
My heart is all Thine own;
My highest powers, my choicest hours,
I yield to Thee alone.

My voice awake, thy part to take;
My soul, the concert join;
Till all around shall catch the sound,
And mix their hymns with mine.

But man is weak Thy praise to speak;
Your God, ye angels, sing;
'Tis yours to see, more near than we,
The glories of our King.

His truth and grace fill time and space;
As large His honors be
Till all that live their homage give
And praise my God with me.

Henry Francis Lyte

My Spirit On Thy Care

My spirit on Thy care,
Blest Savior, I recline;
Thou wilt not leave me to despair,
For Thou art Love divine.

In Thee I place my trust,
On Thee I calmly rest;
I know Thee good, I know Thee just,
And count Thy choice the best.

Whate'er events betide,
Thy will they all perform;
Safe in Thy breast my head I hide,
Nor fear the coming storm.

Let good or ill befall,
It must be good for me;
Secure of having Thee in all,
Of having all in Thee.

Henry Francis Lyte

O That The Lord's Salvation

O that the Lord's salvation
Were out of Zion come,
To heal His ancient nation,
To lead His outcasts home!

How long the holy city
Shall heathen feet profane?
Return, O Lord, in pity;
Rebuild her walls again.

Let fall Thy rod of terror;
Thy saving grace impart;
Roll back the veil of error;
Release the fettered heart.

Let Israel, home returning,
Their lost Messiah see;
Give oil of joy for mourning,
And bind Thy church to Thee.

Henry Francis Lyte

Pleasant Are Thy Courts Above

Pleasant are Thy courts above,
In the land of light and love;
Pleasant are Thy courts below
In this land of sin and woe;
O, my spirit longs and faints
For the converse of Thy saints,
For the brightness of Thy face,
For Thy fullness, God of grace.

Happy birds that sing and fly
Round Thy altars, O most High;
Happier souls that find a rest
In a heavenly Father's breast;
Like the wandering dove that found
No repose on earth around,
They can to their ark repair,
And enjoy it ever there.

Happy souls, their praises flow
Even in this vale of woe;
Waters in the desert rise,
Manna feeds them from the skies;
On they go from strength to strength,
Till they reach Thy throne at length,
At Thy feet adoring fall,
Who hast led them safe through all.

Lord, be mine this prize to win,
Guide me through a world of sin,
Keep me by Thy saving grace,
Give me at Thy side a place;
Sun and shield alike Thou art,
Guide and guard my erring heart.
Grace and glory flow from Thee;
Shower, O shower them, Lord, on me.

Henry Francis Lyte

Praise For Thee, Lord, In Zion Waits

Praise for Thee, Lord, in Zion waits;
Prayer shall besiege Thy temple gates;
All flesh shall to Thy throne repair,
And find through Christ salvation there.

Our spirits faint; our sins prevail;
Leave not our trembling hearts to fail:
O Thou that hearest prayer, descend,
And still be found the sinner's friend.

How blest Thy saints! how safely led!
How surely kept! how richly fed!
Savior of all in earth and sea,
How happy they who rest in Thee.

Thy hand sets fast the mighty hills,
Thy voice the troubled ocean stills;
Evening and morning hymn Thy praise,
And earthy Thou bounty wide displays.

The year is with Thy goodness crowned;
Thy clouds drop wealth the world around;
Through Thee the deserts laugh and sing,
And nature smiles and owns her King.

Lord, on our souls Thy Spirit pour;
The moral waste within restore;
O let Thy love our springtide be,
And make us all bear fruit to Thee.

Henry Francis Lyte

Praise The Lord, God's Glories Show

Praise the Lord, God's glories show, Alleluia!
Saints within God's courts below, Alleluia!
Angels round the throne above, Alleluia!
All that see and share God's love, Alleluia!

Earth to heaven and heaven to earth, Alleluia!
Tell the wonders, sing God's worth, Alleluia!
Age to age and shore to shore, Alleluia!
Praise God, praise forevermore! Alleluia!

Praise the Lord, great mercies trace, Alleluia!
Praise His providence and grace, Alleluia!
All that God for us has done, Alleluia!
All God sends us through the Son. Alleluia!

Strings and voices, hands and hearts, Alleluia!
In the concert bear your parts, Alleluia!
All that breathe, your Lord adore, Alleluia!
Praise Him, praise Him evermore!

Henry Francis Lyte

Praise, My Soul, The King Of Heaven

Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven;
To His feet Thy tribute bring!
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like me His praise should sing?
Praise Him! praise Him!
Praise the everlasting King!

Praise Him for His grace and favour,
To our fathers in distress!
Praise Him still the same for ever,
Slow to chide, and swift to bless!
Praise Him! praise Him!
Glorious in His faithfulness!

Father-like, He tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame He knows.
In His hands He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes,
Praise Him! praise Him!
Widely as His mercy flows!

Frail as summer's flower we flourish:
Blows the wind, and it is gone.
But while mortals rise and perish,
God endures unchanging on.
Praise Him, Praise Him,
Praise the high eternal One!

Angels, help us to adore Him;
Ye behold Him face to face:
Sun and moon, bow down before Him;
Dwellers all in time and space,
Praise Him! praise Him!
Praise with us the God of grace!

Henry Francis Lyte

There Is A Safe And Secret Place

There is a safe and secret place,
Beneath the wings divine,
Reserved for all the heirs of grace;
O be that refuge mine!

The least and feeblest there may bide,
Uninjured and unawed;
While thousands fall on every side,
He rests secure in God.

He feeds in pastures, large and fair,
Of love and truth divine,
O child of God, O glory's heir,
How rich a lot is thine!

A hand almighty to defend,
An ear for every call,
An honored life, a peaceful end,
And heaven to crown it all!

Henry Francis Lyte

When At Thy Footstool, Lord, I Bend

When at Thy footstool, Lord, I bend,
And plead with Thee for mercy there,
Think of the sinner's dying Friend,
And for His sake receive my prayer.

O think not of my shame and guilt,
My thousand stains of deepest dye;
Think of the blood which Jesus spilt,
And let that blood my pardon buy.

Think, Lord, how I am still Thine own,
The trembling creature of Thy hand;
Think how my heart to sin is prone,
And what temptations round me stand.

O think upon Thy holy Word,
And every plighted promise there;
How prayer should evermore be heard,
And how Thy glory is to spare.

O think not of my doubts and fears,
My strivings with Thy grace divine;
Think upon Jesus' woes and tears,
And let His merits stand for mine.

Thine eyes, Thine ear, they are not dull;
Thine arm can never shortened be;
Behold me here; my heart is full;
Behold, and spare, and succor me.

Henry Francis Lyte