

Thursday, March 19, 2009

Christian Hymn ABOVE THE BRIGHT BLUE SKY 150th Anniversary THERE'S A FRIEND FOR LITTLE CHILDREN Albert Midlane IN MEMORIAM Stainer



Above a Bright Blue Sky
There's a Friend for Little Children

Albert Midlane, Author
The Sesquicentennial of the Hymn
Whose Jubilee Was Celebrated on February 7, 1909.

A congregation of 3,000 children sang this hymn on its celebration day in St. Paul's Cathedral.

150 years ago, in 1859, Albert Midlane penned a hymn at the end of his work day that would be included in hundreds of hymnals, travel around the globe, and be translated into 50+ languages.

Anyone might wonder why look to the sesquicentennial of a hymn written by a man who in 2009 is rarely known -- yet, he wrote the hymn that had an actual celebration of its Jubilee (50th) year!

Mr. Midlane (1825-1909) was the son of a devout Christian woman, his father having died before his birth. During his lifetime, he wrote of his of mother, [\(source\)](#)

"How often from the cares of the family would the dear mother lead me into a quiet room; and there kneeling by my side would she, with holy fervour, by prayer bring God into all her circumstances down here; or by sweet communion be with God above them all".

The story as related by Albert and his wife, Miriam, is that the thought of this poem had been on his mind for some time, and at the end of the day, having closed his shop, he sat down to afix the words to paper. When he didn't return to the family quarters, Miriam sought him out, and found him slouched unconscious over his papers.

Volume 50 of the 1909 Musical Times gives us the following information.

Initially, there were additional stanzas, having a relationship to 2Corinthians 2. Some time during it first years, the stanzas were put in their present order. Originally the sequence being, (1) *There's a rest*, (2) *There's a home*, (3) *friend*, (4) *crown*, (5) *song* and (6) *robe*, the keyword in each stanza in italics.

In this same *Musical Times* entry, the following instructions are given: The tune should not be sung too quickly, or both music and words will be spoilt, and the concluding two lines of the last verse naturally suggest a much slower speed in order to give full significance to the prayer which forms the peroration* of this supremely beautiful hymn.

[The Musical Times, January to December 1909](#), Volume L. London, Novello and Company, Limited, 1909, p. 167.

***peroration:** concluding section of a discourse ([wiktionary](#))

There's a Friend for little children

Above the bright blue sky,
A Friend who never changes,
Whose love will never die;
Our earthly friends may fail us,
And change with changing years,
This friend is always worthy
Of that dear name He bears.

There's a rest for little children

Above the bright blue sky,
Who love the blessed Saviour,
And to the Father cry;
A rest from every turmoil,
From sin and sorrow free,
Where every little pilgrim
Shall rest eternally.

There's a home for little children

Above the bright blue sky,
Where Jesus reigns in glory,
A home of peace and joy;

No home on earth is like it,
Nor can with it compare;
For every one is happy,
Nor could be happier there.

There's a song for little children
Above the bright blue sky,
A song that will not wear,
Though sung continually;
A song which even angels
Can never, never sing;
They know not Christ as Saviour,
But worship Him as King.

There's a crown for little children
Above the bright blue sky,
And all who look for Jesus
Shall wear it by and by;
All, all above is treasured,
And found in Christ alone:
Lord, grant Thy little children
To know Thee as their own.

[Stainer tune IN MEMORIAM in pdf file](#)

[Smith tune EDENGROVE in pdf file](#)

Please read below for more about these 2 hymn tunes.

Albert was saved, accepting Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, at a Sunday School teacher's prayer meeting, and baptized by immersion. Baptized within the Baptist faith, he eventually transferred his worship and faith life to the Brethren denomination. He was called the "poet-preacher of the Strict Brethren." ([source](#)) The total of Albert's hymn texts numbers over 1,000. He was known for the positive spiritual images within his words. The best known of his hymns, though, is the one of which we speak today. As the 19th century turned to the 20th, *There's a Friend for Little Children*, was such a well-known hymn and popular enough that on **February 7, 1909, under the auspices of the Sunday School Union, its Jubilee year was celebrated.**

The last of the facts that I have currently about Albert Midlane's life, are first, that he and his wife were the parents of three children, they lived to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary, and that he was a better preacher and poet than businessman, for his friends "relieved" him of his business matters that financially were not solvent.

Further Source Comments ([source](#))

Hymns Hymn Writers of the Church

by Charles S. Nutter, Nashville: Smith & Lamar, 1915.

Dr. John Julian, Editor in Chief of an important 19th century work, The Dictionary of Hymnology, gives the following comment about Mr. Midlane.

They are full of spiritual thought, careful in their wording, and often very pleasing without reaching the highest form of poetical excellence. A marked feature of these hymns is the constant and happy use of Scripture phraseology.

Albert Midlane wrote the following about his poetry.

Most of my hymns have been written during walks around the ancient and historic ruins of Carisbrooke Castle. The twilight hour, so dear to thought, and the hushed serenity the pervading nature have often allured my soul to deep and uninterrupted meditation, which, in its turn, has given birth to lines which, had not these walks been taken, would never probably have been penned.

[THIS LINK](#) will bring you to the New York Times announcement for Albert Midlane's death. You will need to click there to bring up the PDF file.

Regarding the tune, there are two commonly used for this hymn. The first for further elaboration in this discussion, was composed by [John Stainer](#) upon request by the Hymns Ancient and Modern Committee. It was first in print in a publication titled, "[Good News for the Little Ones](#)" edited by [Charles Henry Mackintosh](#), whose Christian affiliation was with the Plymouth Brethren.

IN MEMORIAM was composed rather on the spur of the moment, the 1875 Hymns Ancient and Modern Committee meeting at the Langham Hotel, having difficulty deciding upon a tune for Midlane's song. It was suggestion to Mr. Stainer that he retire to his room and attempt to remedy the problem. Soon to follow was this tune.

[The 1909 Musical Times](#) relates that Mr. Stainer named the tune in memory of his son, Frederick Henry Stainer, who departed this life on December 30, 1874.

The second tune most commonly in use was composed by Samuel Smith (1804-1873) and given the name EDENGROVE or EDEN GROVE. At this point in time I have found very little information about Mr. Smith, other than the most common--he was a resident of Bradford, England, and an organist. Smith held the office of town mayor or two years.

In comparison to the Stainer tune, the melody is more stepwise and presents a predominantly sentimental, comforting emotion, while IN MEMORIAM though sentimental, sounds much more playful with a dance-like 6/8 meter and many more leaps. Both span an octave, with EDENGROVE extending to pitches below tonic at the ending cadence.

Mary Katherine May