

THE STORY OF  
A FESTIVAL  
OF NINE LESSONS  
AND CAROLS  
AT KING'S COLLEGE,  
CAMBRIDGE



## THE STORY of A FESTIVAL OF NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS at KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Although the first *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* at King's took place only a few weeks after the Armistice of 1918 and was introduced by a new Dean who had only arrived back in College the previous April, the innovation was by no means accidental; nor was it original to King's.

The new Dean was Eric Milner-White, who throughout his life was known as 'Milner', this being his second Christian name as well as the first half of his hyphenated surname. Milner was an undergraduate at King's, achieving a double first in history. After curacies in London, he returned in 1912 to serve as Chaplain. Early in the First World War he volunteered to serve as a chaplain to the forces in the 7th Division, mostly on the Western Front, but ultimately in Italy. It was an overwhelming experience. In June 1915 he wrote to M. R. (Monty) James, Provost of King's and originator of an earlier King's Christmas Eve tradition – the telling of ghost stories in the Provost's Lodge by candlelight after dinner.

(Battle) is indescribable, unimaginable. The fresh night air was itself a rushing road like a waterfall, as a thousand shells tore through it. The dark blue sky was lit up by a summer light flash upward from the earth every second. The darker motionless clumps of poplars all around the horizon were continuously silhouetted in white flame. The continuous firework of light balls went up from the German trenches. But most awesome was the noise. We felt so powerless against those splitting cracks and roars, and dreamt

of the metal tearing its way into bodies of poor men.

Milner was a sensitive soul and perhaps prized beauty above all other values; his trauma must have been deep. In a private letter he said that ‘much of my work has been burying hundreds of British’ and he described his condition as ‘mentally and spiritually exhausted’. But he was also brave and was decorated with the Distinguished Service Order; that only one military chaplain has ever received the higher honour of the Victoria Cross indicates his exceptional leadership under fire.

Milner was a devoted and dedicated churchman but he was not satisfied with the pastoral mission of the church of his day nor the way in which worship was constrained by the Book of Common Prayer or by dry practices that failed to touch the hearts or imaginations of the people in the pews – and especially those whose war experiences led them to turn towards God for consolation or away from God in outrage. Back at King’s in 1918 he addressed the College’s Governing Body, outlining the unique opportunity the College had to develop its worship to be more inspiring. They should not have been surprised since he had written to Monty James in 1916 outlining a kind of manifesto for King’s Chapel. The letter spoke of its ‘extraordinary potentiality’ and foresaw that it might become ‘one of the most important churches in the land’.

In the matter of public worship, no Church in the land is more fitted than ours to take a lead. We are free from ecclesiastical authority which governs even most ‘live’ cathedrals... We have unrivalled musical resources. It is my passionate conviction that if we could catch and crystallize the wisest principles of liturgical reform in

the worship of our Chapel, we should be doing a great work, not only for the college and university, but also for the Church and the Empire.

He especially wanted to see 'special services' such as 'a memorial to the fallen', 'an admission ceremony for new choristers' and 'richer provision for the Churches Seasons'. As he put it, 'Here is a field which can be richly sown, and over which I think no battle is likely to rage. Colour, warmth and delight can be added to our yearly round in many ways.' That all these things have come to pass, not only at King's but almost everywhere else, is testimony to the vision born of the horrors of the battlefield.

We do not know when Milner started to think about replacing Evensong on Christmas Eve, or what sort of carol singing he organised in the trenches, but he did not need to start from a blank piece of paper. In the late 1870s the church authorities in the new diocese of Truro decided to draw people into church who had traditionally sung their Christmas Eve carols in the homes of parishioners. The church concerned was St Mary's which was partly sacrificed and partly incorporated into the new cathedral, the foundation stone of which was laid in October 1880. Without a church building to use, Christmas was celebrated in a large wooden structure. The first Bishop of Truro, Edward White Benson, who went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury, decided to give the proceedings in this so called 'shed' some liturgical form. Developing a medieval idea, he drew up a list of nine lessons to be read in hierarchical fashion, starting with a chorister and ending with the bishop. The Truro service was popular, and the order of service printed and sold around the country by Mowbray's.

Others may have simply adopted the Truro service, and while Milner was largely reliant on Benson for his first service in 1918, he soon saw its shortcomings and went on to craft something simpler and with much more of a coherent flow.

The Bishop's scheme, excellent on paper, did not transfer so well into action. The movement was continually held up by a series of rather irrelevant Benedictions between each lection. The singing contained only four carols, with two hymns, three choruses from *Messiah*, and the Magnificat as a climax... These blemishes were at once revealed when the service was tried out in King's College Chapel.

It is therefore the 1919 service that is the clearest model for our service today. The 'rather irrelevant benedictions' are conflated into the short prayer that follows the Lord's Prayer, and the musical shape is almost exactly as today with 'Once in Royal' at the beginning and 'O Come, all ye faithful' and 'Hark! the herald' sandwiching the Collect and Blessing at the end. There is now, however, much more music. In 1919 there was only one carol between each reading, though when they were congregational the invitation was 'to join heartily': a different approach to the cool and unassuming style of our rubrics today.

From the outset, the service was conceived as a gift to Cambridge and the readers in the first and second year included 'a nonconformist minister' and 'the Mayor's Chaplain'. The Provost of Eton also read. While this represented the foundational connection between Eton and King's (Henry VI founded both for the education of poor boys in the fifteenth century) there was a much more personal link, as the then Provost of Eton was

the former Provost of King's, Monty James, who was doubtless delighted to see how his protégé was getting on, and, who knows, *may* have read a new ghost story after dinner that evening.

## THE BIDDING PRAYER

Apart from being the driving force behind the change from Evensong to *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, Milner's most singular and remarkable contribution was to write a Bidding Prayer for the service. Its few short paragraphs are often considered, for instance by Timothy Rogers in his booklet *Christmas Eve at King's: 100 Years of Nine Lessons & Carols*, to have 'literary quality'. Others see it reflecting the resonance and cadences of Cranmer's prose in the Book of Common Prayer.

A Bidding Prayer is a strange text. Unlike ordinary prayers, which are addressed to God, a Bidding is addressed to the congregation and offers authoritative directions regarding fit or necessary subjects for prayer. Milner's certainly does this in the third, fourth and fifth paragraphs. However, before getting to paragraph three, which begins 'But first', the focus is not on what to pray about but is rather an invitation to engage in a shared meditation on the meaning of Christmas. It's the imagination that Milner wants to capture and the soul that he seeks to engage. Whereas Cranmer wrote subclauses, Milner kept his grammar relatively simple and paired words to slow the pace and deepen the impact: the 'care and delight' and 'heart and mind' of the first paragraph, for instance. He invites those who listen to 'hear again the message of the angels' and 'to make this Chapel ... glad with our carols of praise'. The invitation was well received and as the tradition of queuing for hours to

gain entry developed there was a sense of pilgrimage as well as festival about it. Actually travelling to the Holy Land would have been out of the question for most, but to go 'in *heart and mind* even unto Bethlehem' by standing for hours in the front court of King's in the bleak midwinter before entering the candlelit Chapel was perhaps a meaningful and valid substitution.

The first of the three paragraphs of intercession begins with 'the whole world' and then quickly focuses on the local and the particular. In places where the prayer has been adopted so these elements have been changed. It's interesting to note that in the original version it is the 'town' of Cambridge that is prayed for; Cambridge did not become a city until 1951. The second paragraph lists various categories of those who suffer beginning with 'the poor, the cold, the hungry, the oppressed' and ending with those who 'by sin have grieved his (the Lord Jesus') heart of love'. Of note here is that while Milner does mention sin it is in the context of God's love, just as in the introduction the story of salvation set out in the readings is summarised as 'the tale of the *loving* purposes of God'. The final paragraph begins 'Lastly' and is a remembrance of the departed. The tone is positive, they 'rejoice with us' and the famous pairing, 'upon another shore and in a greater light' is evocative both of the many multitudes who have gone before us in life and faith and of the thousands then recently slaughtered on the far side of the English Channel.

## THE FIRST CENTURY

Although A. H. Mann was not an enthusiast for the new Dean's idea, the history of the first hundred years is often told as a



story of the contributions of the Organists and Directors of Music of King's. A. H. Mann was Organist when the service was introduced; in fact he had been in position since 1876 and held the post for an astonishing fifty-three years. His contribution to *Nine Lessons* is heard at the beginning every year in his harmonisation of 'Once in Royal David's City'. It is often forgotten, however, that the 1918 service began with 'Up Good Christen folk' sung by a quartet in the organ loft. This new idea did not stand the test of time and the following year – and ever since – it has begun with 'Once in Royal'. In this way it reflected the Evensong that it replaced, an opening that Monty James recalled fondly: 'I declare I do not know what has moved me more than this did, and still does when I recall it.' We do not know when Mann prepared its harmonisation, but maybe it predates the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* that has made it so famous and well-loved.

The first radio broadcast was in 1928, Mann's last year as Organist, and it was broadcast again in 1929 under Boris Ord. It was not broadcast in 1930, but the public response was such that it was reinstated in 1931 and has remained a fixture, if not a treasure, on the radio ever since. Ord introduced a wider variety of music and himself composed a setting of 'Adam lay ybounden' which was first sung in 1955 and has so often followed the first lesson. It was in his time that the opening verse of 'Once in Royal' was sung by a solo chorister. Harold Darke deputised for Ord during the war years when the BBC did not disclose the identity of the chapel from which the service was broadcast. In 1945 he included his setting of 'In the bleak midwinter', which, given that the great windows of the Chapel had been removed and replaced by tar paper, might have been an apt reflection of the conditions inside.

David Willcocks, who had been Ord's organ scholar before the war, returned to King's in 1957 and was the first Organist also to take the title Director of Music. Willcocks put a very distinctive stamp on the sound of Christmas from King's with his settings of various carols and his arrangement of the final two verses of 'O Come all ye faithful', the famous descant modelled on the refrain of 'Ding Dong Merrily on High' and the so-called 'Willcocks chord' on the first word of the penultimate line of the final verse: 'Word of the Father, / now in flesh appearing'. A climax which amplifies the high point of the service reached just a few minutes earlier in the ninth lesson 'and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. Willcocks was also active in publishing. The first edition of *Carols for Choirs*, published in 1961, included an appendix containing the full order of service. As a result even more cathedrals, churches and chapels across the English-speaking world put together their own version of a 'nine lessons'.

Philip Ledger, who was in post from 1974 to 1982, also made many arrangements, such as 'A Spotless Rose', 'Adam lay ybounden', 'I Saw Three Ships' and 'Stille Nacht'. He also set his own descants, only to be rebuked by a chorister, 'we sing Mr Willcocks's descants here'. It was in Ledger's time (in 1979) that the service was first transmitted in the United States, by Minnesota Public Radio. Its following in the United States is huge, and many involved in its first transmission still gather for breakfast and to listen and join in together, following closely the order of service which they print from the College website. Today MPR relays the programme to approaching five hundred other stations across the United States.

Serving for thirty-seven years from 1982, Stephen Cleobury

had responsibility for more Christmas Eves than any of his predecessors and recorded far more carols and services on CD. It was in his time that the television version, *Carols from King's* settled as an annual event, pre-recorded shortly after the end of Michaelmas Term. Stephen also had the idea of not only presenting newly composed carols but commissioning them, a tradition which began in 1983 and continues to this day. Reflecting Stephen's values and imagination, many of these were sung in languages other than English. As well as French, German, Spanish and Italian there were carols in Swedish, Latvian, Welsh and Church Slavonic.

## RECENT YEARS

The centenary service in 2018 attracted even more media attention than normal and was recorded in full and presented as a CD with a parallel booklet with various reflective contributions on the tradition. The College also produced a CD celebrating the whole history with the CD *100 years of Nine Lessons and Carols* featuring carols conducted by Willcocks, Ledger and Cleobury: a valuable resource for anyone wishing to hear how the sound of the choir has changed over the years.

Daniel Hyde conducted his first *Nine Lessons* here in 2019 and it was not long before he was dealing with the entirely unexpected and hugely difficult challenge of COVID-19. Christmas Eve broadcasts continued every year, but in 2020 it was not live but put together from recordings of carols and music prudently made in November and early December. The editing and mixing by Benjamin Sheen was so effective that, despite the opening announcement, it was experienced 'as live' by the millions who

tuned in to listen.

Practical and logistic matters have always been integral to the wonderful occasion itself on Christmas Eve and security and other concerns have put a question mark over the long-established practice of queuing from very early in the morning or even a day or two before. The College tried various ways of mitigating perceived risks and in 2021 introduced an online ballot system to replace the queue for the six hundred public places. Eighteen hundred places were applied for in the first year and the following year the applications doubled. In the last two years the number of requests has risen to almost six thousand.

Recent years have also seen changes to the Bidding Prayer. I have added 'and health' after 'peace' and replaced 'brotherhood' with 'goodwill' in paragraph three. In paragraph four I extended the list of those whose suffering we should particularly call to mind.

... the poor and helpless, the cold and the hungry, the abused, the exploited, the hated and the oppressed; the sick in body and in mind and them that mourn; the isolated, the lonely and the unloved; the elderly and the little children.

There is more continuity than change and despite the huge number of people who listen I have not received one complaint. Nor did anyone complain when I introduced a whole new paragraph. I gave this change a great deal of careful consideration, but my reasoning was both simple and surprising. It was in fact only in 2024 that I realised that the tone and tenor of the Bidding was entirely post-war. The reality, however, is that whenever we

celebrate Christmas there is a war going on somewhere. The new paragraph was the invitation to call to mind that relentless reality.

And let us hold in our hearts all those who, even as we are gathered here, endure the depredations and travails of war, praying that the story of the Christ-child may draw them closer to the nearness of God's love, and offer new hope in the gospel of peace and loving-kindness.

The addition feels especially apt because, every year since 2022 we have made space for displaced Ukrainians living in Cambridge to attend the service. No fuss has been made, though the colours blue and yellow have been especially evident in certain parts of the congregation.

There have been minor changes to who reads the lessons and who reads which lesson. The Mayor him or herself for many years read from the prophecies of Isaiah in the fourth lesson but now represents the city by reading of the birth of Christ in the sixth lesson. The second lesson is now read by a student of King's rather than a choral scholar and the third by a member of staff. The fourth is read alternately by the Master over the Choristers, who is also the Headteacher of King's College School, and a representative of Eton. The Director of Music no longer reads of the angel's message to Mary but of the host of angels who appeared to the shepherds. But the magi are still with the Vice Provost, and the Provost reads the prologue of John's Gospel. And it remains a chorister who reminds us of the goings on in the garden of Eden that require the response which is the whole 'tale of the loving purposes of God'.

Our *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* is a living tradition. Perhaps the best words to describe the preparation and presentation of this annual service both in the Chapel and to the millions who listen around the world come from one of Milner's poetic pairings in the Bidding: 'care and delight'. An extraordinary amount of care goes into the preparation of the service and there is infinite delight in both experiencing and sharing it.

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