

## THE PENNSYLVANIA CHRISTMAS HYMN OF 1742

BY JOHN JOSEPH STOUTD\*

FROM the beginning of the eighteenth century to the American Revolution, when English language poetry in the American colonies was almost non-existent, the Pennsylvania German religious leaders were producing a mass of religious verse in the high German language which astonishes by its quantity and sur-



*From the original oil painting, probably by Kupetzky, in Herrnhut, Germany.*

*Courtesy Archives of the Moravian Church, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*

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prises by its quality. The able and intellectually alert sectarian élite who brought the early groups to America, were creative writers of more-than-average stature. They wrote an astonishing chapter in the history of American letters.

Several schools of poets arose. At least sixty religious recluses at Ephrata wrote poetry in which they expressed their spiritual experiences, baring their sin-buffeted souls and projecting their mystical ethic of love. The Perkiomen Schwenkfelders produced at least thirty poets who continued on American soil the creative urge of the Silesian schools of German poets during the seventeenth century. Among these was Dr. Abraham Wagener of Worcester, Montgomery County, whose verse was of surprising excellence. Others who wrote verse were Francis Daniel Pastorius, Johannes Kelpius, Johann Seelig, Alexander Mack I, Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, Johannes Preiss, Peter Becker, Christopher Dock, Georg Michael Weiss, Christopher Saur II, Johann Heinrich Müller. At the present writing three hundred and eighty-six poets are known to have written high German verse, religious and secular, in America before 1830.

Perhaps the chief school of poets was the group of more than seventy writers whose American activities were centered in Bethlehem's "little Herrnhut." This small frontier community had twice as many German-language poets as there were English poets in all Colonial America before the Revolution. Not only were these Moravian poets bound into a "school" by commonly-shared images and by devotion to (and sometimes blind imitation of) Count Zinzendorf's verse, but they experimented in astonishing ways with new methods of creating verse.

Pietism, as is well known, was in full-blown rebellion against rationalism. The pietist emphasis was upon the heart, upon spontaneity and sincerity instead of logical order and consistency. The reforms of prosody which Martin Opitz had introduced into German poetry were here consciously rejected and new experiments in spontaneous creation were made. In the second volume of the 1753 London Moravian hymnal,<sup>1</sup> Count Zinzendorf had written:

But the year 1735 saw a remarkable change come over us. We got a decided taste for the simplicity of expression

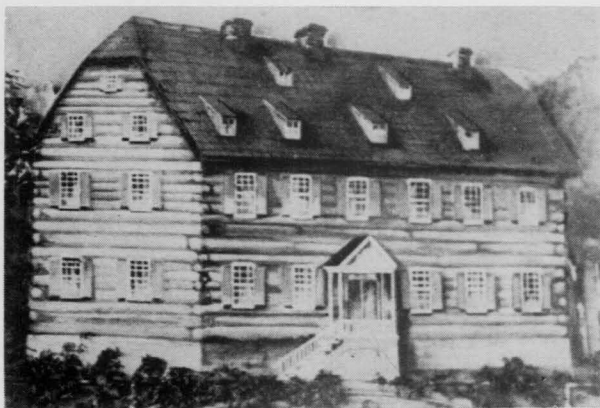
<sup>1</sup> *Des evangelischen Lieder-buchs . . . Brüder-Gesang*, London 1754, Vorrede.

of Luther and the Bohemian Brethren. We considered their neglect of versification a real glory. The first study [of versification], as is usual with all good things, went a bit too far; for that which is not sung from the heart but which is worked over on paper has nothing of its original power. We, on the contrary, seek to express the matter the simplest, truest, and most decent way, with full renunciation of elegance of speech.

Here was a conscious move to return to a creative source akin to the pietist search for unmediated religious experience. Reason and self-conscious prosody were barriers to the rendering of spontaneous conviction.

Surely the most astonishing result of this poetical primitivism was the Moravian practice of extemporizing verse during worship. Going to the heart of the matter with breath-taking boldness, the Moravians held what may be called "poetry jam sessions" when, as melodies were played, words were composed in meter.

The most famous of his American poems—although obviously not the best—was Zinzendorf's extemporized chain of thirty-seven



THE GEMEIN HOUSE

as it was in 1742.

Courtesy Archives of the Moravian Church

strophes which he composed in Bethlehem, in the *Gemein Haus*, on Christmas Eve (new style), 1742.

Zinzendorf, a handsome, towering figure, with deep blue eyes and

boyish enthusiasm, stood before the assembly as *Vorsinger*. The musicians played the melody, *Nun bitten wir*. . . . Then the Count chanted a line in dactylic meter and the congregation sang it back to him; then another line, and another, and another; and so on, antiphonally, until he had extemporized the thirty-seven stanzas of this 1742 Christmas hymn. The Count's secretary took down the text and it has not been reworked.

The first stanza in German runs as follows:

Glückseliger ist uns doch keine nacht,  
als die das Wunder-kind hat gebracht,  
das in einer krippe, (das ist gewisslich  
für eines armen manns kind verdrisslich)  
in lümplein lag.<sup>2</sup>

This was an astonishing performance. Beginning a bit lamely, Zinzendorf soon was overpowered by the evening's mood. His verse grew smoother, pouring out in easy-flowing dactyls. Finally he rose to a forceful climax of mood and meaning which leave no doubt that the spirit was present that night on the Pennsylvania frontier.

Zinzendorf wrote smoother verse, but he never wrote more powerful verse. The more than five hundred other American poems which he worked over on paper have, indeed, a skilled tailoring which the Christmas hymn of 1742 does not have. They have become free-flowing, however, at the expense of sincerity and power.

Bishop Kenneth G. Hamilton has made an excellent translation of the whole hymn.<sup>3</sup> We give below the first, second, third, thirty-sixth, and thirty-seventh strophes in Dr. Hamilton's version:

O blessed night, without compare on earth  
That night whereon the Wonder-child had birth,  
A manger for his crib, on rags he lay;  
No beggar's child would be content to stay  
In such mean state.

<sup>2</sup> *Des Evangelischen Lieder-Buchs . . . Brüder Gesang*, Vol. II (London, 1754), p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth G. Hamilton, "The Bethlehem Christmas Hymn," in the *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society*, Volume xiv, Parts I & II, Bethlehem, 1947, p. 11.

As carpenter his father well might pass  
 Among the people of the middle class—  
 A rank too high, was this, for one to claim  
 Who daily had to find man's feeble fame  
     More burdensome.

So, poverty produced a fit disguise  
 To veil him from all unilluminated eyes:  
 His parents' worth was hid, his royal race  
 Unknown; of ancient glories not a trace  
     Belonged to him . . .

O loved one, henceforth we shall grieve at nought  
 But failure to adore thee as we ought!  
 For thou in love hast swept our record clear  
 As with a broom. No tallies now appear  
     Upon our score.

How peerless is thy love, 'tis peerless still!  
 How thou dost with thyself our being fill!  
 Can we find aught like thee or like thy love  
 On earth beneath or in the heav'ns above?  
     We answer: No!



#### THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

The following inscription is found on the back of this oil-on-canvas painting by Edward Hicks, c. 1830-40, in the Fenimore House, Cooperstown, N. Y.:  
 "Edw Hicks To his addoped Sister Mary Leedom & her Daughters didicates this humble peice of his art of Painting."

*Courtesy New York State Historical Association*