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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Daniel Sedgwick : A Baptist Pioneer of Hymnology

I have not found the name of Daniel Sedgwick (1814-79) in any history of the Baptists that I have been able to consult, but I cannot help thinking he ought to be there. Nor does the *Baptist Quarterly* appear to have mentioned his name in the last forty years. Perhaps the first man in England to collect systematically information about hymns and their authors, he was consulted by the editors of many hymn books of several denominations. In Julian's monumental *Dictionary of Hymnology* Sedgwick is called "the father of English hymnology." The only man who could challenge his right to the title is the great hymn writer, James Montgomery (1771-1854), who was also the first serious student of hymnology in this country and published in 1825 an anthology called *The Christian Psalmist*. The considerable prefaces to this and to his edition of *Olney Hymns* reveal a learning and a poetic insight quite beyond the reach of Sedgwick whose contribution lay rather in the assiduous assembling of information for the use of others. Of Montgomery's place in hymnology I have written at length in my book, *They Wrote Our Hymns* (S.C.M. Press, 1961) and say no more here. But I should like to do something to secure a measure of recognition for the almost unknown and forgotten Sedgwick.

Rather surprisingly, Dr. Julian does not mention Sedgwick's labours in the same field in his preface, especially as he had the considerable assistance of his collected manuscript notes. But though Sedgwick was no hymn writer Julian does him the unusual honour of a special biographical article, and search elsewhere in the pages of the *Dictionary* is rewarding. We find that the author of the biography, W. T. Brooke, is singled out for thanks in the preface, where Julian describes his services as "invaluable" and his knowledge of early English hymnody as unrivalled. So we turn to the article about Brooke himself and are there told that he was "following in Sedgwick's steps" and that "from his intimate acquaintance with Daniel Sedgwick he gradually learnt all that Sedgwick had to teach him." It is interesting to note in passing that Brooke was brought up as a Baptist though he became an Anglican.

Daniel Sedgwick was born in Leadenhall Street in London on November 26, 1814. His parents were very poor and he received

practically no education at all. He struggled to teach himself but his deficiencies were obvious all his life. At first apprenticed to a shoe-maker his love of books led him in 1837 to set up as a second-hand bookseller at 81 Sun Street, Bishopsgate, where he specialised in theological literature. In 1839 he became a member of Providence Strict Baptist Church, Grosvenor Street, Commercial Road. His business prospered and the shop was specially frequented by ministers. He made a hobby of collecting religious poetry and hymns, and besides building up a remarkable private collection his aid was often sought in searching out volumes for those with similar interests. One of his notable clients was Horatio Bonar. Another was George Offer, also a Baptist and a bookseller, who had a once famous collection of old Bibles and "Bunyaniana" and was the editor of a valuable edition of Bunyan's complete works in three massive volumes.

The Church of England in particular was then beginning to make up for its long neglect of hymns, and many parsons published collections for use in their own parishes. The Oxford Movement was soon to set itself to search out old Latin hymns and the process that led to the compilation of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was beginning. Sedgwick's studies had made him a recognised authority and many enquiries came to his shop. Dr. L. F. Benson, the eminent American hymnologist, says that Sedgwick was the first to collect and collate old hymn books and that his little shop became the centre and himself the oracle for many years of much serious study of the sources and texts of hymns. (Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church*, p. 205.)

Besides collecting and selling books Sedgwick ventured out as a publisher and between 1859 and 1868 issued a series of reprints of hymns of the 17th and 18th centuries under the general title of *The Library of Spiritual Songs*, each with a biographical introduction. Several of the hymn writers no longer find any place in our books, but among them were William Williams, Toplady, John Ryland, Samuel Crossman, Anne Steele, and Thomas Olivers. In 1860 he also produced a little forerunner of Julian's *Dictionary*, viz. *A Comprehensive Index of many of the Original Authors and Translators of Psalms and Hymns with Dates of their various Works, Entirely Collected from Original Publications*. The first edition occupied eight pages in double column: the second, three years later, was twice the size and listed 1,410 writers. It announced that he also had for sale a list of some 1,600 hymn books and editions of the Psalms.

"Thenceforth," says the article in the *Dictionary of National Biography* by George Clement Boase, "he was recognised as the foremost living hymnologist." He was a frequent contributor to *Notes and Queries* on the subject, in addition to dealing with many direct enquiries. Among those who consulted him was Sir Roundell Palmer, afterwards Earl of Selborne and Lord Chancellor, who

edited in 1862 an admirable anthology, *Hymns of Praise*. In its preface he pays tribute to Sedgwick's help and says he had "attained to a knowledge (of the literature of hymns) probably not possessed by any other Englishman." Selborne's book was the first attempt to recover the original texts of hymns and in this Sedgwick was of great assistance. Selborne also wrote a famous article on "Hymns" for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in which he quotes Sedgwick three times. Two other notable people who relied on his help were C. H. Spurgeon in the compilation of *Our Own Hymn-book*, 1866, and the Rev. L. C. Biggs in the annotated edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 1867. Indeed, declares the *Dictionary of National Biography*, "Hardly a hymnbook appeared in his later years in which his aid was not acknowledged."

As I have said, Sedgwick was not an educated man and had many limitations which he did not always recognise. Brooke, who knew him intimately, while praising his industry and perseverance in the gathering of information, refers to his "dogmatic ignorance and want of power to balance evidence." Yet, he adds, "with all drawbacks of education, temperament and narrow theological prepossessions, he by the collection and comparison of hymns and hymnological literature, and by careful annotation, made it possible for others to reap a rich harvest from the stores of hymnological wealth which he had accumulated."

Sedgwick died on March 15, 1879. A few hours before his death he asked that Cennick's hymn, "Thou dear Redeemer, dying Lamb," should be sung to him, and he emphasised the last verse:

When we appear in yonder cloud
 With all the ransomed throng,
 Then will we sing more sweet, more loud,
 And Christ shall be our song.

HUGH MARTIN.