



## BOOK REVIEW

**COMMON GROUND (A SONG BOOK FOR ALL THE CHURCHES), St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, March 1998, words & music £18.50.**

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This is an interesting publication, not least for the claims that are made by its editors, as well as for the Notes accompanying some of the 150 items of praise contained therein.

In setting out its stall, the editors state:

*"choruses and praise songs already widely known and memorised, were, in the main, excluded in order that newer material might be published."*

If only this statement were true. There are twenty-two well-known "praise songs" which appear in many publications. These include: *Amazing Grace*; *Be still, for the presence of the Lord*; *Bless the Lord (Taizé)*; *Eat this Bread (Taizé)*; *For the fruits* (though the inclusion of the tune: East Acklam is to be welcomed); *Great is Thy Faithfulness*; *Here I am, Lord*; *How great Thou art*; *Jubilate, Everybody*; *Kyries* (Russian Orthodox); *Lord, for the Years*; *Meekness and Majesty*; *Night has fallen*; *O Lord hear my Prayer (Taizé)*; *One more Step*; *Restore, O Lord*; *Shine, Jesus, shine*; *Spirit of the Living God*; *Stay with me (Taizé)*; *The Lord's my shepherd* (Brother James' Air); *The Servant King*; *There's a Spirit in the Air* (but why no descant ?); *We are marching in the Light of God*; *Will you come and follow me ?*; *You shall go out with Joy*.



The apparently random use of upper and lower case letters in the titles adds to this book's uniqueness.

In their enthusiasm to encompass the World Church, the Editors have given to us, rather curiously, a *Celtic Alleluia* from Lourdes (Were there Celts in Lourdes with the blessed Bernadette ?).

In addition, the notes accompanying either the words or the music make fascinating reading, eg:

**90** *congregations in the USA have no difficulty in mastering the whole song, so, by implication, congregations in Scotland . . .*

**92** *The increasing frequency of adult baptism requires (sic) that churches have suitable hymns, of which this is one.* Firstly, there is no mention anywhere in the hymn that this is an adult being baptised, and secondly, our own *Common Order* states "*only one Form and Order (for Holy Baptism) has been provided, adapted for children and adults*" (p. xiv) suggesting that the sacrament applies equally to children as well as adults, so why provide a particular hymn which allegedly encompasses adult baptism.

**96** *This very rhythmic song is confusing only on paper ! It must be sung unaccompanied.*

**97** *As a contrast to unison singing, verse 2 may be sung as a duet with the second part provided by the lower treble line. (Why verse 2 ?)*

**99** *When sung in 4 parts, ensure that basses and tenors are at ease singing major 7<sup>th</sup>s against the soprano line*



**101** *This acclamation (Peruvian Gloria) cannot be accompanied. It must (sic) be sung a capella. All that is needed is for the congregation to be divided into three sections. Everyone imitates the cantor for the first two musical phrases. Then each section is given a line in turn by the cantor which it continues to sing at the same pitch until all three parts are in harmony.*

**107** ***Sanctus** and **Benedictus** said or sung in all traditions during the prayer which precedes Communion.*

Liturgically, they are not. If we again examine *Common Order* we find that following the *Benedictus* comes the epiklesis then (25) The Lord's Prayer, then (26) The Fraction, then (27) *Agnus Dei* (which is said or sung in all traditions) and only **then** comes the Communion. This note displays a lack of liturgical scholarship. (Though the note at **3** - *Agnus Dei* - is correct.)

**109** *It may seem unusual in one collection to have two (sic) hymns which allude to the Holy Spirit in the feminine. This is not to say that the Spirit is a woman, but to encourage deeper thinking about the nature and work of the Spirit.*

Cross-referencing, we discover in **32** the note that *In Aramaic and Hebrew, the Holy Spirit is referred to by female pronouns*. It is a pity that the editors did not find time to cross-reference their own collection, for in *Common Ground* there are, in fact, *three* hymns which allude to the Holy Spirit in the feminine, namely **32**, **88** as well as **109**

**13** *It is frequently and wrongly assumed that this text (Behold the Lamb of God) alludes to the Crucifixion. It was actually said of Jesus before his baptism (but only in St John's Gospel) This little verse can be used repeatedly throughout a lengthy reading from the gospel or as an introit during Lent. The*



only lengthy reading from the gospel in *Common Order* is for Palm Sunday (p623) (2nd ed) where under Years A, B and C one finds:

| Year A                                  | Year B                                            | Year C                                  |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| St Matthew 26: 14-27:66<br>or 27: 11-54 | St Mark 14: 1 - 15:47<br>or 15: 1 - 39<br>(40-47) | St Luke 22: 14 - 23:56<br>or 23: 1 - 49 |

which immediately link it with the Passion, as does the season of Lent itself.

The inclusion of Liturgical Texts in a book of this type is odd (even odder when the texts concerned are not consistent with ELLC (The English Language Liturgical Consultation, 1988) - a frequent complaint in many congregations seeking to promote ELLC is that the people never know which version of a text is going to be used, so to include, as the editors have done, texts *adapted from* the standard liturgical texts adds to the people's confusion). Or maybe the approach adopted by the editors is insensitive to the current ecumenical re-assessment of the role of the Eucharist as being possibly the goal of Christian Unity or a means to achieving that goal.

Less convincing than the adaptation of standard Liturgical texts is the inclusion of the **Mallaig Sprinkling Song** though the editorial note does concede that its use is not confined to the rite of Sprinkling. Nevertheless, its inclusion sits very uneasily alongside our Reformed concept of Baptism.

Reference to the **Sprinkling Song** leads to discussion of the purpose of *Common Ground*. In the *Preface* John Bell states that:

*"What has been less common (in major Christian traditions) is the will to work co-operatively in providing a book as ecumenical in its*



*preparation as in its content. This book is the fruit of such rare co-operation."*

Scottish Churches' Council did it in the 1970s with *New Songs for the Church* edited by Erik Routley (a Congregationalist) and Reginald Barrett-Ayres (Aberdeen University) with frequent ecumenical committee meetings at Scottish Churches' House in Dunblane. This book was published by St Andrew Press, the same publishers of *Common Ground*.

This is not the only extraordinary claim made. Mr Bell also states that *Common Ground* takes over 20 per cent of its material from nations in the southern hemisphere. In actual fact, there are only 20 praise items out of 150 which come from the southern hemisphere. In other words, 15 per cent come from the southern hemisphere. It is a curious fact to discover with **91** (*Now go in Peace*) that the tune "*picked up from a multi-cultural neighbourhood in Coventry*" should be deemed to be "*Caribbean*". And what a shock it must have been to Brian Wren to discover that he was American (**57** - *I come with Joy*) but a relief in **102** (*Praise God for the Harvest*) to learn his British citizenship had been restored. Or is the territorial derivation based only on tunes ? If it is, why is it that **92** (*Now through the Grace of God*) is deemed to belong to England, having as its tune *Strathcathro* ? And if Fred Pratt Green's *For the Fruits of all Creation* (**34**) were to be sung to the alternative tune *Ar hyd nos*, as suggested, would that then make it Welsh ? **47** (*Hear me, dear Lord*) is attributed as belonging to Scotland, but is set to the tune *Londonderry Air*.





**63** (*Inspired by Love and Anger*) is Scottish yet has an Irish folk tune !

**80** (*Love is the Touch*) the tune *Amor Dei* is not Scottish but the author of the words is !

There are a number of inconsistencies in this book which help make it unique, not least in its almost excellent set of indices (including a welcome list of addresses of copyright holders and administrators - some of whom have already been contacted for permission to print the material), but it is a pity that there is no alphabetical list of tunes.

Even the musical directions lack consistency, ranging as they do from: “Unison” to “Gently” where there is no harmony and “At a steady pace” where there is harmony.

There are some examples of excellent contemporary Christian poetry, notably Jean Holloway’s *Forty Days and Forty Nights* (37), Alison Robertson’s *Haven’t you heard* (46), Douglas Galbraith’s *I’ve waited long* (55) being a paraphrase of the *Nunc Dimittis* and set to the tune *Tam Lane* shows real understanding of Scottish culture and it is good that (Alec-sic) Alex Muir’s tune *Bays of Harris*, having already been hi-jacked by the Free Church, has found its rightful place in this volume. Nevertheless, it might have been better if more genuinely Scottish folk tunes had been utilised (eg. *Fàghail Steornabhagh*) for, quoting from the *Preface* of a volume published by the then Committee on Publications [Public Worship and Aids to Devotion] in 1935:

*Research seems to indicate that the fundamental emotions,*



*in Gaelic music at least, have selected for themselves appropriate intervals of sound which provide a universal musical language for the Gael - a language which links him with his fellow-countrymen in a communion of spirit which he senses but cannot analyse. These intervals, when linked together by different rhythms, produce a musical phrase vocabulary comparable to the language vocabulary. By repetition and combination of these phrases the folk-melody makes its appeal and secures its unity. Thus genuine Gaelic folk-melodies are in essence ideal hymn tunes because of their deeply rooted significance and introspective character."*

*An Laoideadair , pub 1935*

*Common Ground* seems to fail in that linking, when it uses tunes like *Ye Banks and Braes* (138), *Dream Angus* (1) and *Eriskay Love Lilt* (76) which are all redolent of the 1950s when Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, Tonic Sol-Fah and Sir Hugh Robertson were in vogue and smack of the rather fey "Tartan and purple heather, rain-drenched land and whisky-sodden people" image of Scotland. Had they used Duncan Ban McIntyre's native island tune of *Berneray* or the Harris Blacksmith, John Morrison's tune *Heisgeir* then the book now offered to all the churches might have been more in sympathy with the Gael than it presently is.

Nevertheless, it was a delight to find 4 contributions from James MacMillan, (arguably Scotland's premier composer) - but might it not also have been profitable to have either consulted or commissioned Peter Maxwell-Davies whose lyrical works might have provided an additional Scottish dimension (by residence, not nationality) ? *Farewell to Stromness* could, quite easily, be adapted and used as a hymn tune. To be fair, the editors did manage to find two ancient tunes:



*Solas an t'saoghail* (36) and *Rodail* (sic) (44). Had the editors been fully consistent with their modernised form of Gaelic then they would have used “Roghadal” as the correct Gaelic spelling.

Sadly, the two Gaelic hymns included appear not to have been proof read, since the three last words of 56 should have graves and not acutes.

This attractively presented ring-bound volume containing 150 items of praise, amongst them are 4 from Taize, 31 from Scotland, 22 from the USA, 3 each from New Zealand and Zimbabwe, 2 each from Russia, Guatemala, Korea and Malawi, 1 each from China, Germany, Peru, Chile, Wales and Argentina and a massive 45 items of praise from the *Wild Goose/Iona* stable which, unfortunately gives an imbalance to the book, off-set by its beguiling photographs back and front of St Columba's Bay, Iona “*common ground for all Christians*”. This statement might antagonise those who argue for the primacy of Ninian (if they are Celts) and might antagonise others who are Picts, or even more so the successors of Augustine with whom Roman Catholics and Anglicans might feel much more comfortable.

For the most part, the editors have endeavoured to provide a hymn-book with melodies singable by most groups of people and have attempted to provide music and words on facing pages, though 38 items fail and are on 3 if not 4 pages. Pity the musicians who have to cope with that.





This book may have greater success than *Hymns for a Day* and *Songs of God's People*, even though scholarship, as well as balance, seem to have been sacrificed to enthusiasm, but what gives real cause for concern is the sad thought, and concern, that the format and content of what might come to be known as the future *Revised Church Hymnary 4* will be influenced by this volume.

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