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CAROLS FROM KING'S: CENTENARY CELEBRATION

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In 1918, the Dean of King's College, Cambridge took what turned out to be a momentous step. Eric Milner-White (1884 - 1963) had originally been appointed chaplain at King's in 1912, having previously studied History there as an undergraduate. At the end of the First World War, Milner-White returned to Cambridge, decorated with a DSO in recognition of his wartime service as a senior chaplain and combatant officer. Milner-White was appointed Dean of King's, and he acted swiftly after his promotion in deciding to mount a carol service in King's Chapel on Christmas Eve of 1918. The format of the paradigmatic Truro service was maintained, but the preposition within the title was changed to a conjunction. *Nine Lessons* with *Carols* became *Nine Lessons and Carols*.

King's College, Cambridge lost 199 former choristers, students, and staff in the First World War. The 1918 Carol Service was designed to stand as a memorial to those who had forfeited their lives in bloody conflict, as thanksgiving for those who had survived (Milner-White himself had several lucky escapes), and as a beacon of optimism for a better future. In 1918, the choir of King's College, Cambridge was run by A. H. Mann (1850 - 1929). Arthur Henry Mann – known affectionately and universally as 'Daddy' – had been running the choir at King's since 1876, four years even before that first ground-breaking *Nine Lessons with Carols* service at Truro Cathedral. Daddy Mann was a Victorian-born choirmaster, and he possessed all of the stereotypical mannerisms and habits that implies. He rarely offered praise, and when he did, he damned with the faintness of it. According to the Dean of Gloucester, Seiriol Evans (1894 - 1984), speaking nostalgically in 1960, Mann was a master of 'freely-expressed disparagements'. Daddy's mantra was the passionate exhortation that his singers should produce 'a good round tone'. And Mann's colourful Sunday afternoon tea parties for the King's choral scholars were legendary: the affection in which Mann was held by all those who knew and worked with him was unparalleled. A. H. Mann began the process of creating the finely-tuned instrument that is the Choir of King's College, Cambridge in the modern era, and he spent half a century doing so.

Mann's mission to improve standards of singing within King's chapel was helped by the completion of a new school building for the choirboys in 1878 and by the appointment of Vincent Reynell (1848 - 1929) as headmaster of the Choir School. Reynell and Mann worked well together. They fostered a secure and challenging environment within which their sixteen chorister charges could develop as people and musicians. Improvement in standards of choral singing in England was in the air at the time, and it was particularly apparent in the ground-breaking work of Charles Harford Lloyd (at Gloucester Cathedral and at Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford), of John Stainer (at St Paul's Cathedral in London after his move from Magdalen College, Oxford), and of Walter Parratt (Stainer's successor at Magdalen and later organist at St George's Chapel, Windsor).

The carol service was introduced at King's when A. H. Mann was in his fifth decade of service there. It is testament to Mann's perennially youthful outlook that, at the age of 68, he was able to embrace new ideas and adopt new working practices. Mann had a gift for training young people to sing well, although his methods involved the application of vocal metaphor to the rudiments of music rather than technical engagement with the physiology of the voice. Eric Milner-White also found the company of young boys stimulating, and the combination of Dean Milner-White and Choirmaster Mann fanned the flame of the roaring post-war fire that was the professionally-delivered carol service.



The 1918 King's carol service used the Truro template, and like its West Country counterpart, the Cambridge congregation was requested to 'join heartily in the singing of the hymns and verses specially marked for that purpose'. What's interesting from our vantage point is how the carol canon had changed since the 1880 Truro service, and this is in large part a reflection of the publication of the *Cowley Carol Book* (1901-2), the *English Hymnal* (1906), and the *English Carol Book* (1913). The first carol in the 1880 Truro service had been 'The Lord at first had Adam made', a rustic version of which had headed Gilbert Davies's pioneering collection of 1822. The character of the urban King's service was exemplified by placing the antiquely scholastic 'Up! Good Christian Folk, and listen' at the beginning of the service. This was sung by the choir alone – before the entry procession – to the melody of *O quam mundum quam jucundum* ('O what a world, what a pleasure'). This was an item from the short 'Concord' section of the 1582 *Piae Cantiones*, harmonized and reworded by Rev. George Woodward; it had been published in the expanded *Cowley Carol Book*, published in October 1902.

What happened next on Christmas Eve of 1918 was to have a profound effect on the history of the performance of the Christmas carol – globally. Indeed, apart from Eric Milner-White's decision to mount the *Nine Lessons and Carols* at all, the choice of 'Once in royal David's city' as the Processional Hymn was the most popularly long-lasting decision that Milner-White and Mann made. 'Once in royal' has become – to a significant proportion of the carol-listening public – the sound of Christmas. The Bidding Prayer followed. This was a masterpiece of composition on Milner-White's part, and one of the most carefully constructed and effective passages of Anglican prose since Archbishop Thomas Cranmer had compiled the *Book of Common Prayer* in the mid-sixteenth century. The Bidding Prayer is a magnificent piece of liturgy. In under three hundred words – using only a few more words than the famously concise Gettysburg Address – Milner-White's Bidding Prayer keenly and economically focuses the congregation's mind in recollection and prayer. It makes clear that, by the prayer's end, formal intercession will have been neatly accomplished and the rest of the service will comprise an uninterrupted patchwork of readings from scripture, choir carols, and participatory hymn singing. Milner-White's Bidding Prayer took the worshipper of 1918 by the scruff of its imagination to Bethlehem and recalled the events of the Nativity and the Epiphany, with Mother and Child at the centre of the tableau. While that colourful image remained in the mind, Milner-White quickly placed the city and university of Cambridge in the arena. While acknowledging the debt to King Henry VI as the founder of Eton and King's, the importance of King's College Chapel (dedicated to Our Lady) to the celebration of Christmas was spelt out. The poor and helpless, the hungry and cold, the oppressed, sick, and grieving: all were dutifully remembered. But the pin-droppingly tense moment came when the Dean called to mind 'all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore, and in a greater light'. There it was. This was a memorial service for those who had made the ultimate sacrifice; a memorial for those who had covered themselves in glory while dying for their country. Every single person in King's College Chapel on Tuesday 24 December 1918 had cause to recall the memory of someone who'd been killed in the so-called Great War; indeed, most members of the congregation would be remembering many. By focusing on the events surrounding the birth of the Holy Child, hope for the future could be established. As the Order of Service stated:

This service was drawn up from sources ancient and modern by Archbishop Benson for Cathedral use, the Lessons, which tell the whole story of our Redemption, being read in order by the Cathedral ministers from chorister to Bishop. In this Chapel it is adapted also to symbolise and express the loving bond between the two Foundations of King Henry VI here and at Eton, the goodwill between University and Town, and peace within the whole Church of the Lord Jesus, as well the joy and worship of us all at the coming of our Christ.

That rubric is rather stilted and syntactically self-conscious, and not a patch on Milner-White's Bidding Prayer, but it nevertheless sets the scene for a pattern of worship that fused old and new as it has so successfully ever since. Musically speaking, extracts from Handel's *Messiah* had fallen off the agenda. Most of the items in the 1918 carol service were stanzaic numbers whose tunes were catchy and memorable, easy to sing and listen to. Some of the carol arrangements presupposed a level of engagement from the choir that looked beyond the aspirations of congregational forces, but these musical items were structurally direct and their arrangements voguish. The central congregational pillars of the 1918 service were 'While Shepherds watched', 'O Come, all ye Faithful', and 'The First Nowell'. In an act of characteristic trust, Daddy Mann led the choir up to the altar in silence during the last verse of 'The First Nowell', while the rubric in the order of service stated that 'The Congregation should sing the



last verse by themselves’ – something of a gamble since during the preceding five verses the congregation had only sung the refrain to each verse. At the altar, the choir sang a metrical version of the Magnificat (as *per* the end of the Truro service) – a charming but outmoded set piece that was never to be repeated in the King’s format. The Blessing was followed by the Recessional Hymn, ‘Hark! the herald Angels sing’, and this remains the only musical item that has never been moved or replaced.

The most obvious difference between *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in King’s College Chapel upon Christmas Eve 1918* and the service that the world loves now was its opening. In 1918 the service began with the choir singing the Invitatory Carol ‘Up! Good Christian Folk, and listen’ from the nave of the chapel. Only after that did the choir sing ‘Once in Royal David’s City’ – the first four verses sung by choir alone, the congregation joining in at the fifth verse (‘And our eyes at last shall see Him, / Through His own redeeming love’). The 1918 service started the ball rolling, and Milner-White and Mann – having agreed that the service should be repeated in the following year – set out to make some changes that would have far-reaching consequences.

In 1919, the nine single-sentence Benedictions that had been inherited from the Truro template and that had preceded each of the nine lessons were excised. The opening passage of St John’s Gospel (‘In the beginning was the Word...’) became the final lesson (rather than the sixth as in 1918, or the seventh as in Truro). ‘God rest you Merry, Gentlemen’ (with the comma in the correct place, naturally) was introduced, and ‘While Shepherds watched’, ‘O Come, all ye Faithful’, and ‘Hark! the herald Angels sing’ remained. ‘The First Nowell’ and the metrical version of the Magnificat were cut, and the service retained almost none of its Evensong-based roots. The Invitatory Carol ‘Up! Good Christian Folk, and listen’, which in 1918 had resembled an arresting Evensong introit, was sung after the Bidding Prayer so that the service now began with ‘Once in royal David’s city’. At this stage ‘Once in royal’ was sung by the whole choir right from the start; the cosmos-stopping Treble solo was an innovation of the 1930s.

From 1919 onwards, the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* at King’s bedded down into a consistent format. The pillars remained ‘Once in royal’, ‘While Shepherds watched’, ‘O Come, all ye Faithful’, and ‘Hark! the herald Angels sing’, and were joined by ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ (ousting ‘Up! Good Christian Folk’) as the Invitatory Carol in 1920, in which position it remained up to, and including, 1947. Gustav Holst’s setting of the medieval carol text ‘Lullay, my liking’ first appeared in 1924 (having been written eight years before and published in 1919), although Holst’s celebrated setting of Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘In the bleak midwinter’ wasn’t used by A. H. Mann at all. Instead, Mann used a musical setting of ‘In the bleak’ by Thomas Strong (Bishop of Oxford 1925 - 37), which was pressed into (the) service in 1927. At 4.45 pm on 24 December 1927, as cassocks and surplices were removed at the end of the tenth *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, the history of the carol was to change irrevocably.

1928 was the most important year for the carol in the twentieth century: Oxford University Press published the *Oxford Book of Carols*; and at Cambridge University the Choir of King’s College broadcast its *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* on BBC Radio for the first time. In spite of its official title of *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, the *Radio Times* billing for Monday 24 December 1928 advertised a *Christmas Eve Carol Service from King’s College, Cambridge*. At 3.30 pm, 2LO London (launching its signal from equipment atop Selfridge’s department store in Oxford Street – one of twenty local transmitters) and 5XX Daventry (on Borough Hill in Northamptonshire in the heart of England) radiated the sound of King’s College Choir on 361.4 metres (Medium Wave) and 1,562.5 metres (Long Wave) respectively. In an inviting coincidence, later that same evening the author E. F. Benson read his pre-war ghost story *The Confession of Charles Linkworth* on the radio. Edward Frederic Benson (1867 - 1940) was the third son of the late Edward White Benson who, as Bishop of Truro, had devised the original *Nine Lessons with Carols* service. By Christmas of the following year, on 24 December 1929, 2LO London was broadcasting on 356.3 metres and 5XX Daventry on 1,554.4 metres. But all was not well in the ether, and Colonel Sir Stuart Sankey of Little Hampden in Buckinghamshire was so distressed by the gremlins within his wireless that he set aside his turkey to write to the Editor of *The Times* on Christmas Day:

Sir, —The B.B.C. has recently contrived that the programmes from London and Daventry should be delivered simultaneously into our receiving sets, and in this neighbourhood no mere three-valve set seems able to divorce them. On Christmas Eve the choir of King’s College Chapel gave us carols, which would



have been delightful had they not been accompanied by banalities from 2LO; and the Bidding Prayer and Lord's Prayer from Daventry were punctuated by the dance music of the Wireless Orchestra from London.

Disgusted of Little Hampden, claiming that his 'three-light hearkener-in' (as the three-valve radio set was quaintly known in some English dialects) wasn't up to the job. In fact, as King's was broadcasting and the sun was setting, Colonel Sankey was probably experiencing interference from a foreign radio station, but might have been confused into thinking that he was hearing Jack Payne and his B.B.C. Dance Orchestra, who were broadcasting on 5GB Daventry Experimental at the time. What is now clear is that Sir Stuart should have been more careful in what he wished for. In the following year, 1930, the BBC did not broadcast the *Nine Lessons* from King's at all. King's choir was in transition, and recovering from the passing of Daddy Mann on 19 November 1929. Two days prior to his death, on Sunday 17 November, Mann had played the organ for the service of Matins in King's, had sung in the choir at Evensong, and gave his usual tea party for the choral scholars. Daddy died two days later, six months short of his eightieth birthday, but choral worship continued as usual, including the broadcast of *Nine Lessons* on Christmas Eve, under the direction of Bernhard 'Boris' Ord (1867 - 1961). Boris Ord had been appointed a Fellow at King's in 1923, and had gently assumed control of Chapel music at the end of Mann's life. From our point of view, it is difficult to imagine why Boris Ord wouldn't want the 1930 service to be broadcast, or indeed why the BBC wouldn't want to do so. Had Mr Ord or Rev. Milner-White known that the 1930 service would otherwise be the only one not to be broadcast from 1928 onwards, things might have been different and they might have worked harder to make it happen. Certainly in retrospect the BBC regretted not having broadcast the 1930 service, a fact made clear by the wistful *Radio Times* billing of 24 December 1931:

This is a welcome reappearance of the Christmas Eve Carol Service from King's College, which was broadcast in 1928 and 1929. It is one of the loveliest services to be heard anywhere.

'B. Ord' was billed as 'Organist', whereas in 1928 and 1929 the musical direction had remained anonymous. And so the process of broadcasting *Nine Lessons* quickly became a tradition, aided and abetted by the listening public's heart growing fonder through the absence of the 1930 service. Indeed the broadcast became such a well-respected tradition that the BBC invented a history for it that is jaw-dropping in its fabrication. The announcement that prefaced the 1939 radio broadcast included (yes, it really did) this:

The Festival has been held since the Chapel was built nearly 500 years ago, and the atmosphere of tradition is preserved by ranks of lighted candles glowing in the scarlet cassocks of the choristers.

In fact, the Festival was only celebrating its twenty-first birthday on 24 December 1939, a coming-of-age nicety that could have been turned into a cute continuity announcement. But it's easy to see why such grotesque sexing-up of the facts might have been undertaken at the end of 1939. As Rebecca Frost wrote in 2010:

The desire to promote English customs had of course been heightened by the outbreak of war in September. The King's College carol service fulfilled an important need for programmes which boosted national pride at home and abroad. By calling on a five-hundred year pedigree, the programme-makers were hoping to validate their claim that the service formed an integral and important part of English national life.

By this stage *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in King's College Chapel upon Christmas Eve* was not just broadcast nationally: in 1936 the BBC Empire Service (the predecessor to the World Service) broadcast a recording of the carol service; in 1937 the Mutual Broadcasting System, a new American radio network, took the whole service; and in 1939 French and Italian broadcasting networks spread the King's net even wider. It had been less than ten years since Festivalgate, when the BBC had not broadcast the service on Christmas Eve of 1930, and which had resulted in dissatisfaction all round. Still only a teenager in 1939, the BBC was about to get it wrong again:

Christmas Eve this year falls on a Sunday and we are bound to include on a Sunday the usual number of religious services. Thus, to take an hour and a quarter's Carol Service in addition to the usual quota would overweight that day with this kind of programme.



The BBC's solution was to broadcast only half of the service from King's. Graeme Williams, BBC Outside Broadcasts Executive, wrote to the Dean of King's, Eric Milner-White on 6 December. What is so revealing is that Williams doesn't question the fact that many listeners are going to be irritated – that is apparently a given:

We must lose some of the service and so irritate listeners who enjoy the carol service, but we believe that the irritation will be much less if we break into it and leave at its completion, rather than start when you start and then leave before the end. In the one case the beauty of the service will help to soothe the listeners' initial irritation at having missed its beginning, in the other the irritation will come at the end and so be more likely to persist and thereby neutralise the earlier enjoyment.

Eric Milner-White proved himself to be more attuned to the requirements of public service broadcasting than anyone causing the fracas at the BBC. Milner-White wrote back to Williams by return:

If you take the first half hour of the Service, not only is the timing exact, but you get those sections which the outside world loves most to hear; the boy's opening solo, the beautiful Christmas Bidding Prayer, the lesson read by the Chorister as well as one other, and no fewer than *five* of the best and loveliest carols, the whole ending with a great congregational carol, *God rest you merry, gentlemen*, which will serve admirably as a climax for this first section...If I say finally that the College insists on this, it is only to save the B. B. C. from making a bad mistake!

Notwithstanding the fact that Milner-White describes his own Bidding Prayer as beautiful (but then it really is), the force of the Dean's argument was accepted by the BBC. Indeed, just one week later we learn that 'Mr Williams has now left this Department'. The BBC's Director of Outside Broadcasting was Seymour de Lotbinière (1905 - 84), known affectionately as 'Lobby':

I am only sorry that we gave you and the College authorities so much trouble in bringing us – and myself in particular – to our senses.

A thoroughly gracious response, and one that, as a BBC employee, I find characteristic of all my dealings with the corporation.

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