

STORIES
behind the
(BEST-LOVED)
SONGS
of
CHRISTMAS



CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
1. Angels, from the Realms of Glory	1
2. Angels We Have Heard on High	9
3. Away in a Manger	17
4. The Christmas Song	23
5. Do You Hear What I Hear?	29
6. The First Noel	36
7. Go Tell It on the Mountain	43
8. God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen	50
9. Good Christian Men, Rejoice	55
10. Good King Wenceslas	62
11. Hark! The Herald Angels Sing	69
12. Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas	75
13. I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day	80
14. I Wonder as I Wander	86
15. I'll Be Home for Christmas	92
16. It Came upon the Midnight Clear	98
17. Jingle Bells	105
18. Joy to the World!	110

CONTENTS

19. Mary, Did You Know?	119
20. O Come, All Ye Faithful	126
21. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel	133
22. O Holy Night	140
23. O Little Town of Bethlehem	149
24. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer	157
25. Silent Night	164
26. Silver Bells	173
27. There's a Song in the Air	179
28. The Twelve Days of Christmas	184
29. We Three Kings of Orient Are	193
30. What Child Is This?	201
31. White Christmas	207

FOREWORD

There is a treasure of inspiration to be found in these pages. If you love Christmas, then this book is going to bless you time and time again. You will laugh and cry, and history will come to life. You will learn and understand things you didn't know before, giving you a much richer grasp of the music that makes this season so very special. You will probably also want to rush out and tell someone you know one of these stories.

Those who know me well know that Christmas is my favorite time of the year. I love shopping, wrapping gifts, decorating, and even the hustle and bustle that goes with the season. But above all the other traditions, I love the music of Christmas.

For me, music brings Christmas to life. Songs about the birth of Jesus transport me to the first Christmas. A carol that describes snow makes me feel the chill. When I hear the story of a shunned reindeer, I feel sorry for him. I guess because these songs offer wonderful memories along with beautiful music, I treasure the times I get to sing them at home, in church, and on the stage. To me,

FOREWORD

each one of these special songs is a pretty package that I get to unwrap again every year; and now, thanks to this book, each one of these musical packages contains a newly discovered surprise that makes it even more meaningful. These new surprises are the product of one man's quest.

Ace Collins is not only one of my closest friends, he is my favorite writer and the best storyteller I have ever known. In this book, he has touched me like never before. To know the background on these inspirational Christmas songs has changed my perspective on Christmas itself. I will never again sing any of these carols without being transported back to the place and time it was written.

Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas is a book that will bring the Christmas season into sharper focus for you. You will find out why I now wish my friends a “mighty” Christmas, how a tiny bell made a movie unforgettable, and why one of the most spiritual songs I have ever sung was once banned by the church. Yet more than simple information and holiday trivia, these stories will enlighten and inspire you in ways I can't begin to explain. I can only say that after reading this book, I believe that Christmas—its roots and traditions and music—will mean so much more to you.

Thank you, Ace, for answering the call and bringing these stories to the world. Your gift of this book helps all of us to remember the true reason for the season and the inspiration behind the music that brings Christmas to life

FOREWORD

each year. There is no doubt that reading and rereading *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* will be a central part of my Christmas for years to come. I can hardly wait to share this book with everyone I know and love.

—*Louise Mandrell*



ANGELS, FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

Angels, from the Realms of Glory” —possibly the best-written, sacred Christmas carol of all time—helped launch a revolution that continues to impact millions of lives today. At its heart is its writer, an Irishman born in November of 1771.

James Montgomery was born in Irvine, Ayrshire, Scotland. Montgomery’s father, John, was an Irish Moravian missionary. When his parents were called to evangelistic work in the West Indies, the child was sent to a Moravian community in Ballymena, County Antrim, Ireland. By the time he was seven, James was at Fulneck Seminary, Yorkshire, England. Five years later, the parents James hardly knew died on the mission field.

Perhaps because of the distance from and the tragic loss of his parents, Montgomery never was very interested in his

STORIES *behind the* BEST LOVED SONGS of CHRISTMAS

schooling. Flunking out of seminary, he became a baker's assistant for a short time. By the age of twenty, the young man was little more than a vagrant, moving from job to job, often unemployed, and homeless for weeks at a time.

Montgomery's only interest was writing. He spent what little money he had on pencils and paper, taking hours to compose poetic odes on everything from loneliness to faith. Though no publisher was interested in his work, the radical editor of the *Sheffield Register* saw something in the young man's raw talent. For the next two years Montgomery got paid to do what he most loved to do—write stories. He also learned firsthand about the hardships of being an Irishman under English rule. At the age of twenty-three, when the newspaper's owner was run out of town for writing radical editorials concerning Irish freedom, the missionary's son took over the *Register*.

In an attempt to quell the British government's wrath, Montgomery changed the paper's name to the *Sheffield Iris*. Yet he didn't change its editorial stance. Just as his parents had strongly rebelled against the strict rules and rituals of England's official church, James was bent on carrying on a written war for Ireland's freedom. At about that time, he also became an active leader in the abolitionist movement. His fiery editorial stance twice landed him in prison. Yet each time he was released, he returned to the *Iris* and continued his printed war for freedom on all fronts.



*Angels, from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.*

Chorus:

*Come and worship, come and worship,
Worship Christ the newborn King.*

*Shepherds in the fields abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with man is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant Light.*

Chorus

*Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great Desire of nations,
Ye have seen His natal star.*

Chorus

*Saints before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In His temple shall appear.*

Chorus



STORIES *behind the* BEST LOVED SONGS of CHRISTMAS

When Montgomery was not waging an editorial crusade against English rule and slavery, he was reading his Bible in an attempt to understand the power that motivated his parents' lives and ultimately led to their deaths. In time, his Scripture study and rebellious zeal would blend and send the young man on a new mission. One of the first hints of this change was revealed on Christmas Eve 1816.

Irishmen, who hated all things British, probably carefully studied the newspaper each day, hoping to find some Montgomery-penned passage that would inspire more to join their revolution. It is certain that local government officials who read the *Iris* often wished to nail the man who was so often a thorn in their side. Yet on December 24, 1816, readers discovered a different stance from the fiery editor. On that day, his editorial did not divide Irish from English, but rather brought everyone who read the *Iris* closer together.

Written in the same poetic verse that Montgomery had employed during the aimless wanderings of his youth, "Nativity"—what would eventually become the carol "Angels, from the Realms of Glory"—told the story of angels proclaiming the birth of a Savior for all people, English and Irish, rich and poor, Anglican and Moravian. Eloquent, beautiful, and scripturally sound, Montgomery soon touched more lives for Christ with the stroke of his pen than his parents did in all their years of missionary work.

ANGELS, FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

Still, when read between the lines, there was a bit of social commentary in “Nativity.” A verse long-deleted from the carol speaks of a society that needs to right some wrongs. That lost stanza also reveals the writer’s personal journey in finding purpose and meaning in his own life:

*Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes the sentence;
Mercy calls you. Break your chain.*

As Montgomery would soon find out, his poem *would* break chains, but not those he had envisioned. The impact of “Nativity” would actually foreshadow the writer’s future, since he would come to revolutionize music and thinking in the English church.

As often is the case with inspired work, irony stepped in and took an important role in revealing “Nativity” to a mass audience. The Irish revolutionary’s poem might have been forgotten if not for an Englishman. It was a member of the English establishment, the same group against which Montgomery had long fought, that would become the agent in making his poem a worldwide favorite.

Henry Smart, the son of a music publisher, had given up a successful law career to become one of England’s finest organists and composers. Like Montgomery, he

STORIES *behind the* BEST LOVED SONGS of CHRISTMAS

was a revolutionary, only his cause was bringing new and beautiful music to English congregations, something that often involved bitter conflicts. Many traditionalists wanted nothing in church services but the simple chants that had been a part of worship for hundreds of years. They often argued that the members of the congregation were merely spectators and should not be involved in the important facets of worship. Smart, however, felt that God spoke to every man and woman and that worship should be a joyful, corporate experience.

In the face of ridicule, Smart published new song-books with harmonized melodies. When people heard his harmonies, they demanded that his work be used by the church. Bowing to the will of the people—and realizing that other Protestant denominations had already begun using this “new” musical style—the Church of England allowed the composer’s ideas to take root. It is no exaggeration to say that Smart is to harmonized church music what Bach is to the German chorale.

Yet the fact that Smart *saw* the need for new excitement in worship was ironic. By the age of eighteen, Smart was going blind. He probably couldn’t have even read the poem that James Montgomery had written on Christmas Eve, 1816. But somewhere, some twenty years after it had been written, the composer listened to the Irishman’s words. Inspired by the wisdom, power, fire, and beauty he saw in “Nativity,” Smart composed a tune to go with the

ANGELS, FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

poem. When published, the Montgomery/Smart collaboration had a different title and a new, vibrant life. “Angels, from the Realms of Glory” would not only be welcomed as a new Christmas carol, it would soon become one of the songs that opened the door for a new, joyful, and uplifting musical style in hundreds of English churches.

But even before Smart had married his music to Montgomery’s poem, Montgomery had lost interest in the Irish revolution. As he grew to fully understand his parents’ calling, he returned to the Moravian church and became an avid worker for missions. He also began to write hymns, ultimately composing more than four hundred. With the aid of Henry Smart, he led a quieter rebellion, bringing a festive, personal style of music into church services that made the congregation an active part of worship.

A music critic once wrote, “For comprehensiveness, appropriateness of expression, force and elevation of sentiment, ‘Angels, from the Realms of Glory’ may challenge comparison with any hymn that was ever written, in any language or country.” Therefore, it seems appropriate that the strong faith that was evident in every word, line, and verse not only sustained the song’s remarkable writer on his often difficult and solitary journey through life, but also helped open the church door for a more joyful worship experience.

Always looking at his own life and experiences for

STORIES *behind the* BEST LOVED SONGS of CHRISTMAS

inspiration, Montgomery once wrote in an inspirational poem that he meant to set to music:

*Beyond this vale of tears,
There is a life above,
Unmeasured by the flight of years;
And all that life is love.*

Montgomery continued to write hymns until the day he died in 1854. By that time, the man twice imprisoned by England for his beliefs had heard his “Angels, from the Realms of Glory” sung in the Anglican churches of London. And the revolution begun in an Irishman’s newspaper eventually touched people both throughout England and far beyond her borders.