



CHARLES WOOD

Ascension Hymn

SATB and Organ

COMMENTARY

Charles Wood's *Ascension Hymn*, composed in 1913, survives amongst the composer's music manuscripts in the library of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge. It is a hymn-anthem like his earlier works written for use at commemoration services at Caius, *Heaven* (1898) and *Glorious and powerful God* (1910). The melody is presented with contrasted choral textures in each verse, underpinned by a continuous organ part. Wood based some of his hymn-anthems on pre-existent melodies, as in *O thou sweetest source of gladness* and *God omnipotent reigneth*, but the *Ascension Hymn* follows his earlier college works in being based on an original melody. For *Heaven* Wood had selected a text by Caian divine Jeremy Taylor, and for *Glorious and powerful God* he chose a text dating from around the time of the death of John Caius in 1610 that survives in an anthem by Orlando Gibbons, but for his *Ascension Hymn* Wood turned to his fellow Anglo-Irishman Alfred Perceval Graves (1846-1931), father of the poet and writer Robert Graves.

Wood had already composed a secular cantata to words by Graves as a teenager in 1885, and the two published a collection of *Irish Folk-songs* in 1897, dedicated to another of Graves's Anglo-Irish collaborators, Charles Stanford. It was during the period when Wood and Graves were working on their next Irish collection, the *Irish Country-side Songs* (1914), that Wood composed his anthem to Graves's poem 'The Ascension'. Wood omitted the fifth stanza in order to create a four-verse structure, including a verse in which the melody is placed in the tenor part, thus following the sixteenth-century practice with which he was familiar from his extensive work on early-modern hymns.

Graves's text appeared in his miscellaneous anthology *A Celtic Psalter* (1917), and contains several minor differences to the version found in Wood's autograph score, dated December 1913. The two versions can be compared below, with the changes shown in bold:

Graves, *A Celtic Psalter* (1917)

When Christ their Lord, to Heaven upraised,
Was wafted from the Apostles' sight,
And upwards wistfully they gazed
Into the far, blue Infinite,
Behold two men in white apparel dressed
Who thus bespake them on the mountain crest:

"Why stand ye, men of Galilee,
So sadly gazing on the skies?
For this same Jesus, whom ye see
Caught in the clouds to Paradise,
Shall in like manner from the starry height
Return again to greet your joyful sight."

Would, O Lord Jesus! thus to hear
Thy farewell words we too had met,
Among Thine own Disciples dear,
Upon the brow of Olivet!
Yet are we blest, though of that joy bereaved,
Who having seen Thee not, have yet believed.

O, then in each succeeding year
When Thine Ascension Day draws round,
With hearts so full of holy fear
May we within Thy Church be found,
That in the spirit we may see Thee rise
And bless us with pierced hands from out the skies!

Christ, if our gaze for ever thus
Is fixed upon Thy Heavenward way,
Death shall but bring to each of us
At last his soul's Ascension Day,
Till in Thy mercy Thou descend once more
And quick and dead to meet Thy coming soar.

The CMS edition of Wood's *Ascension Hymn* RS159 (2025) adopts Graves's published text since it presumably represents the poet's preferred version of the text, and fits comfortably within Wood's hymn-anthem format.

Charles Wood?, *Who through the desert vale* (1927)

After Wood's death in 1926, his widow Charlotte, his former pupil Jack Meredith Tatton, and others, made great efforts to publish more of Charles Wood's music in all genres. Charlotte Wood and J. M. Tatton's work included the publication of an altered version of the *Ascension Hymn*, now with the text *Who through the desert vale*, in 1927. This transformation may have had its origins in the terrible losses of the First World War. Wood had lost his elder son in 1918 and in 1919 he composed *Expectans expectavi* to words by Charles H. Sorley, the son of a close Cambridge friend, who was killed in 1915. J. M. Tatton had lost two brothers in the war, including Eric Hudson Tatton, author of the poem 'Who through the desert vale', and it seems likely that the text was added to Wood's anthem in part to help perpetuate his memory. Eric Tatton's poem speaks of the search for God in nature:

Who through the desert vale of discontent
Stumbling and faint his sad way ne'er hath trod,
Who on the mountains ne'er had pitched his tent,
'Mid rocks and thorny thickets seeking God;
Not his to see above the mountains' rim
The unveiled glory of the cherubim.

Wood, *Ascension Hymn* (1913)

When Christ their Lord, to Heaven upraised,
Was wafted from the Apostles' sight,
And upwards **steadfastly** they gazed
Into the far, **faint** Infinite,
Behold two men in white apparel dressed
Who thus bespake them on the mountain crest:

"Why stand ye, men of Galilee,
So sadly gazing on the skies?
For this same Jesus, whom ye see
Caught **on** the clouds to Paradise,
Shall in like manner from **His** starry height
Return **at last to your rejoicing** sight."

Would, O Lord **Jesu** thus to hear
Thy farewell **message we** had met,
Among Thine own Disciples dear,
Upon the brow of Olivet!
Yet are we blest **by Thine own saving thought,**
Since we believe, though we have seen Thee not.

Then, Lord, on each succeeding year
When Thine Ascension Day draws round,
With hearts so full of holy fear
O may we in Thy Church be found;
That in **thy** spirit we may see Thee rise
And bless us with pierced hands from out the skies!
Amen.

Yet he who cramped in dull mortality
 Exults not with the exulting birds of Spring
 And in the deep-toned anthem of the sea
 Hears not the motion of an angel's wing,
 He ne'er shall hear, with birds and sea combined
 God's golden trumpets pealing down the wind.

Then teach us Lord thy glory still to seek
 With humbleness of heart but strength of aim,
 Till of thy truth the waving forests speak
 And night declare the magic of Thy name;
 Till all the streams Thy majesty confess,
 And all the little hills Thy holiness.

When compared to the poem by Graves for the *Ascension Hymn*, a problem is immediately apparent. The match was far from straightforward, as although the two texts comprised six-line stanzas with an ABABCC rhyming scheme, Graves's lines followed the syllabic pattern 8-8-8-8-10-10, whereas each of Tatton's lines had 10 syllables. In the following example (expression marks removed) one can see something of the nature of the changes made, with the loss of the simple, even flow of the original:

Wood 1913

T&B Unison

1927 version

T&B Unison

Organ (1913)

'Why stand ye, men of Ga - li - lee, So sad - ly ga - zing on the skies; For

Yet he who cramped in dull mor - ta - li - ty Ex - ults not with the ex - ult - ing birds of spring, And

In his article 'The 'Hymn-Anthem': a new choral form' (*The Musical Times*, July 1930, p. 632) Charles Waters quotes lines from Wood's published anthem to show how the rhythm of a hymn-like melody can be manipulated to suit the changing stress patterns of the text, though in this case the changes were required because of the particular need to accommodate different numbers of syllables per line. Waters was probably unaware of the original version. Although the music is essentially the same in the two pieces, several differences (including a longer organ introduction and many rhythmic changes) mean that the two texts cannot be presented together in the same edition. Moreover, Tatton's poem has three verses, and so the musical textures of the last two verses of the original anthem are combined in the setting of Tatton's third verse.

There is no separate manuscript of 'Who through the desert vale' amongst the Wood manuscripts at Gonville & Caius, and the alterations are added in pencil to the neat autograph score of Wood's *Ascension Hymn*. The changes are not in Wood's hand, and it seems very possible that they were made by Tatton rather than Wood, though presumably with Charlotte Wood's blessing. The work is mentioned in several of the surviving letters from Charlotte to Jack (known by Charlotte as John) Tatton which are found amongst Wood's music manuscripts at Caius. They explain how 'Who through the desert vale' was rejected first by the Faith Press in October 1926 but then accepted by Stainer & Bell in February 1927, and performed in King's College Chapel in the summer. She refers to it as "your brother's anthem" or "the setting of your brother's words" and "the anthem to your brother's words", none of which give a definitive answer as to whether or not Charles Wood was involved in the process in any way, but underline how important the link with Eric Tatton was in their discussion of the work. J.

M. Tatton was himself a composer of many choral works, and certainly had the necessary skills to have carried out the adaptation. In the absence of definitive evidence, it remains possible that Wood himself may have played a part in the process or have been fully responsible for the change, as was assumed by Ian Copley in his book *The music of Charles Wood - a critical study* (Thames Publishing, 1978), but the problem currently remains unresolved.

The Tatton brothers

Jack and Eric Tatton were two of five brothers of the Tatton family of Edgware and attended Watford Grammar School. Eric, along with his brother Norman, were both killed on active service, and are listed on the war memorial in Edgware High Street. Eric's obituary in 'Flight' magazine on 9 May 1918 gives further details about his military service:

Captain ERIC HUDSON TATTON, R.A.F., who was killed in action on April 20th, aged 23, was the youngest of the five sons of Mr. and Mrs. Tatton, of Edgware, and joined the U.P.S. Brigade in September, 1914. He received his commission in the East Yorkshire Regiment in January, 1915, and was gazetted lieutenant in the same year. He saw active service in Egypt and then in France, taking part in the offensive on July 1st, 1916. Subsequently he transferred to the R.F.C., and obtaining both his "wings", he was again at the front for eight months' active service. In July, 1917, he was sent back to England, and in August was gazetted captain and Flight-commander, returning to the front on March 30th. His four brothers also joined H.M. Forces during the early days of the war. The eldest brother, Norman, fell at Vimy Ridge on April 9th, 1917; one, who served in Princess Patricia's C.L.I., has been invalided out of the Service, and two are now in France.

Further details in the public domain indicate that he was killed in action when his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire over Glisy, and that he is buried at Picquigny British Cemetery, Somme.

Eric's brother Jack, having survived the war, moved from Cambridge to London to continue his musical education under Wood at the other institution to which Wood was attached, the Royal College of Music. He then spent most of his later life in America. A plaque erected outside his former home in Victoria, Texas, was erected in 2011 by the Texas Historical Commission, and reports as follows:

J. Meredith Tatton (1901-1970), conservationist, composer, cattleman, and writer, was born in Leek, Staffordshire, England. In 1930, Tatton came to Texas and married Victoria native Virginia Drake Hallinan (1901-1993), a great-granddaughter of legendary cattleman Thomas O'Connor. The couple lived in England from 1932-36 before returning to make Victoria their home; they had one son. The Tattons had extensive area ranching interests. "Jack" Tatton was also a director of Victoria Bank & Trust Co., a director of the National Quarter Horse Breeders Association, a trustee of Our Lady of the Lake College (San Antonio), a senator of the University of St. Thomas (Houston), and president of the South Texas Historical Association.

Tatton did not forget his links with Charles Wood and Gonville & Caius, since besides leaving to the college the letters he received from Wood's widow, he also sent several of his own compositions published in the U.S.A. which are placed in the library's 'J. Meredith Tatton manuscript collection'. Despite all his other activities, the memory of his brother's poetic skills may have inspired a collection of poetry of his own, entitled *Now we are one, and other poems* published in 1957.

Geoffrey Webber
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