

The Stories Behind Our Carols

by Dorothy Sollars

Art by James Teason

ONCE AGAIN Christendom raises its voice and sings, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come . . ." This hymn and scores of other joyous phrases and inspiring melodies help us express our feelings on the anniversary of Christ's birth. But where did the phrases originate, and who set them down to music? The answers are Christmas stories in themselves. "Joy to the World" is the oldest of our hymns, based on David's writings long before the birth of Christ and found in the 98th Psalm. Isaac Watts, father of many English hymns, adapted the psalm to Christmastide and published it in a book in 1719. Handel later wrote the stirring music. Watts hoped his hymn would help neighbors and friends proclaim their love for the Lord. He had no idea he had given the entire Christian world a cornerstone of its Nativity music. The same humble beginning marked the birth of "Silent Night, Holy Night." Father Joseph Mohr and other churchmen were planning a special Christmas program for the town of Oberndorf in the Austrian Alps. Father Mohr felt that amid the pomp and color some simple words of praise should be dedicated to the Christ Child. In a short time, he jotted down the verse of "Silent Night" and gave it to church organist Franz Gruber who composed the music just as effortlessly. On Christmas morning, the charming simplicity of their work shone like the star of Bethlehem in the Christmas celebration, and within a few years "Silent Night" became one of Europe's most popular hymns. History is vague about the origin of "The First Noel" and "O Come All Ye Faithful" ("Adeste

Fidelis"). The latter, probably some 250 years old, may have been processional music used by monks marching to midnight Mass in French cathedrals. Both the French and English claim to have originated "Noel," and its history may date back to the Norman conquest. Leading church figures also contributed to our wealth of Christmas music. Martin Luther, a versatile musician who believed strongly in celebrating the Nativity in the home, wrote the lullaby carol, "Away in the Manger." Charles Wesley, brother of Methodist founder John, wrote the words to "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" and many other lasting hymns. He began writing religious music after being inspired by a group of Moravians singing the Lord's praises on a voyage across the Atlantic. One of our latest carols, an American product, came when Phillips Brooks, a leading preacher of the late 1800s, visited Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and attended services in the Church of the Nativity. He never forgot the experience and later wrote "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem," which so impressed his children's choir they wanted music for it. Louis Redner, a well-known composer, promised to provide the music by the following Sunday. However, his usually fertile imagination went blank. On Saturday, tired and discouraged, he fell into bed, certain he had failed Brooks and the children. Early in the morning, he suddenly woke, a lovely melody haunting his consciousness. The hymn was performed hours later and has been a favorite ever since. The inspiration that has given the world its Christmas carols has never been confined to one era or one nation. Like the Babe it glorifies, it has been for all peoples and all times.

From universal origins have come the joyous songs that herald the birth of Christ.



JOY TO THE WORLD



AWAY IN THE MANGER



SILENT NIGHT



HARK, THE HERALD ANGELS SING



OH, LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM