

“In the Cross of Christ I Glory” ~ John Bowring

John Bowring was born at Exeter in Devon, England, on October 17, 1792. He was considered to be one of the most remarkable men of his day as well as one of the greatest linguists who ever lived. He was a member of nearly every learned society in Europe. Before he was sixteen years of age he had mastered five languages without the aid of a teacher. It is said that he could converse in over 100 different languages before his death. Bowring was also one of the preeminent British statesmen of his day: Commissioner to France, Consul at Canton, Minister Plenipotentiary to China, Governor of Hong Kong, and twice a member of Parliament. Queen Victoria knighted him in 1854. He was a prolific writer on the subjects of politics, economics, and religion as well as the author of many poems and hymns, including the rather familiar missionary hymn, “Watchman, Tell Us of the Night.” Yet despite his many accomplishments, including thirty-six volumes of published works, John Bowring is known today primarily as the author of this simply stated hymn text.

There is a story (possibly apocryphal) about the inspiration for these words. The tradition is that Bowring was sailing past the coast of Macao, China. On the shore were the remains of an old, fire gutted church. Above the ruins, he saw the church’s cross still standing.

On his tombstone are inscribed the words of this hymn, “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.”

The writing of the tune in 1851 by Ithamar Conkey is also interesting. He was the organist and choir master at the Central Baptist Church of Norwich, Connecticut. One Sunday during the Lenten season of that year, Conkey was disappointed when only one choir member appeared for the morning service, a faithful soprano by the name of Mrs. Beriah S. Rathbun. Conkey was so displeased and irritated with his choir’s unfaithfulness that he left the service in disgust immediately after playing the prelude. That afternoon he thought with remorse of the service that he had left and recalled on of the hymns to have been used, John Bowring’s text, “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” sung to a dull and obsolete tune. Before the evening service Conkey composed a new tune for this text and named it after his one faithful choir member, Mrs. Rathbun. He confessed later that, “*the inspiration that came to me at that moment was vivid contrast to my feelings at the morning service.*”

*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o’er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*

*When the woes of life o’ertake me,
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,*

*Never shall the cross forsake me,
Lo! it glows with peace and joy.*

*When the sun of bliss is beaming
Light and love upon my way,
From the cross the radiance streaming
Adds more luster to the day.*

*Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.*