

'Cradled in a manger, meanly'

The Christmas hymn '*Cradled in a Manger*' begins with the image of the manger and reaches out to the whole world. It was composed c. 1877 by the Wesleyan Methodist Minister Rev. George Stringer Rowe. The *Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology* describes it as almost exclusively used by British and it would appear to be almost exclusively British Methodists that now sing it and who invariably refer to it by the slightly confusing first line 'Cradled in a manger, meanly'. It was first included in a Methodist Hymn Book in 1904 and subsequently in *The Methodist Hymn Book* (1933), *Hymns and Psalms* (1983) and *Singing the Faith* (2011).

Rowe was interested in hymns, he was on the board with issued *Wesley's Hymns*, the final version of John Wesley's 1780 Methodist hymnbook, in 1875. He wrote hymns specifically for use in Sunday Schools and for Sunday School anniversaries. *Cradled in a manger* is the only one of his hymns still in frequent use.

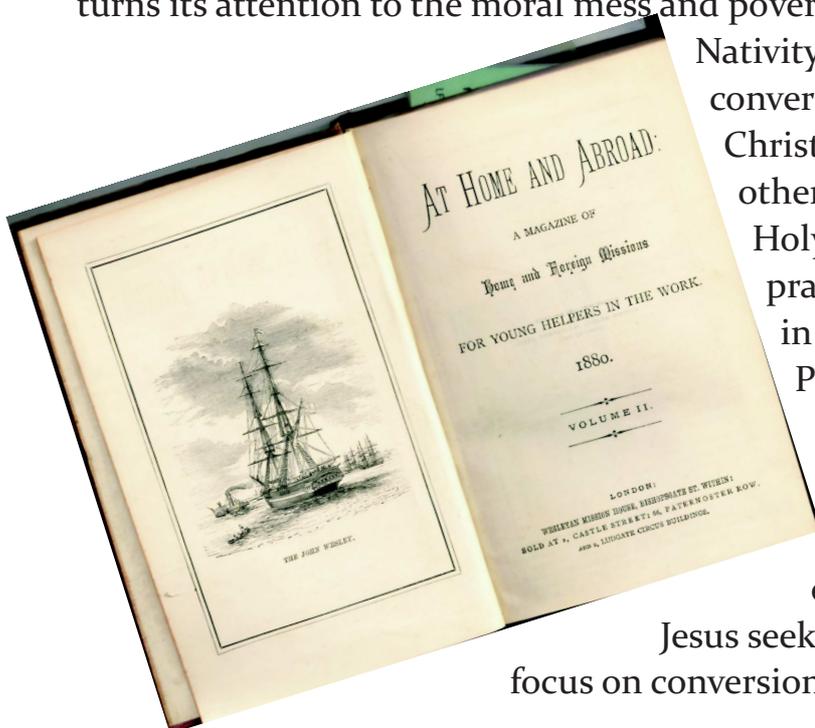
The hymn's lyrics offer an unusual perspective on Jesus in the manger and the celebration of Christmas. The story of its author, origin and use shed light on the world in which it was created and our world today.

'Happy they within the stable' – Christian Joy

Although it is 'quiet' hymn, sung to various gentle tunes, the lyrics are joyful. The idea of happiness is repeated in the opening verses. Jesus may be cradled 'meanly' (which here means 'in poverty' rather than 'stingily' or 'nastily'), but his presence brings joy and those close to him are happy. The hymn speaks of how the singers can deepen their Joy and share the happiness of the first Christmas.

'Evil things are there before Thee' – The Need for Holiness

Rather than focussing on the mess and poverty of the stable at Bethlehem, the carol turns its attention to the moral mess and poverty of the human heart. In this way the Nativity of Christ becomes an image of conversion, with Jesus entering the life of the Christian believer. This parallel is found in other popular nineteenth-century carols: 'O Holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray; Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today' (*O Little Town of Bethlehem*, Phillips Brooks).



Holman Hunt's famous picture of Christ as Light of the World (1851-3), made popular in countless reproductions, offered the Victorians a visual image of Jesus seeking entry to a person's heart and life. The focus on conversion, commitment and personal holiness

associated with this image was always central to Methodism and received renewed emphasis in Victorian England at the time this hymn was written.

‘Send to these the joyful tidings’ – Missionary Emphasis

George Stringer Rowe, the author of *Cradled in a manger*, was deeply involved in the missionary movement. From 1888 to 1904 he was Governor of the Wesleyan Methodist Theological College at Headingley in Yorkshire where missionaries were trained. He wrote popular accounts of missionary history, including *A Missionary among the Cannibals*. Rowe was also very involved in the Sunday School movement and wrote a number of hymns specifically for Sunday School

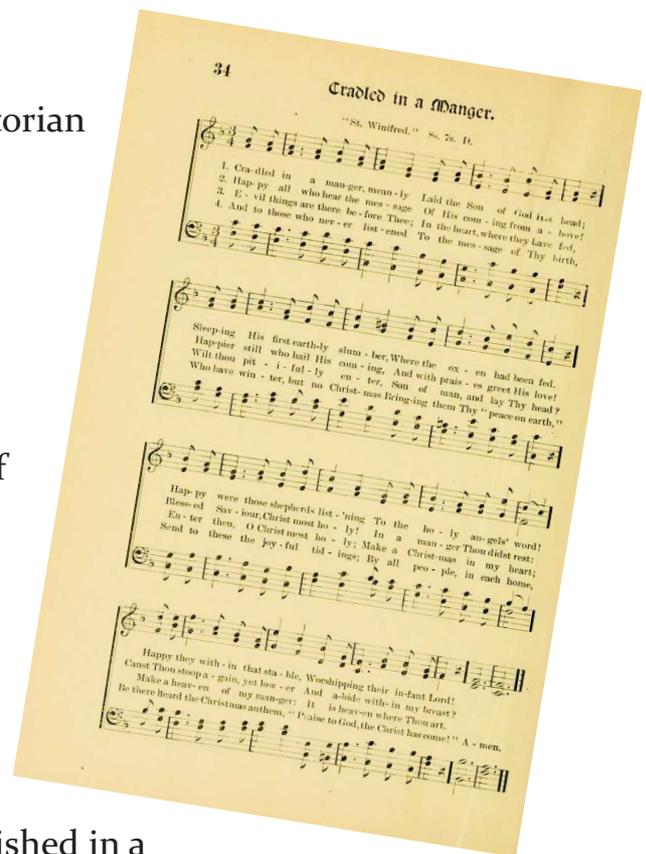
Anniversaries. This Christmas hymn was first published in a children's missionary magazine which he edited. It is not surprising that the final verse has a strong missionary emphasis, which is unusual in a Christmas hymn.

‘By all people in each home’ – Faith and reading in the Home

The hymn was first published in *At Home and Abroad: A magazine of home and foreign missions for young helpers in the work*. Rowe was the editor of the magazine and had also edited the less engagingly titled, *Juvenile Offering*.

The 1870 Education Act made schooling compulsory for children from 5 to 12, which added to a growing market for books and magazines which children could read at home. Churches and religious societies saw the opportunity offered by such magazines to promote their ideas through stories, poems, informative articles and perhaps music for the piano in the parlour. In some homes it may have been the children who read this material to their illiterate parents. Such publications implied a culture of domesticity, the pleasures of learning, reading and sharing at home. When *Cradled in a manger* was included in the *Methodist Sunday-School Hymnbook* of 1879 it found wider use at Sunday School carol services before making its way into the main Methodist hymn books.

Many parts of our popular image of Christmas celebrations are inherited from the Victorians. From the royal family downwards, the idea of celebrating Christmas at home in the family circle was important. George Stringer Rowe also published a number of books to encourage and resource people in their private prayers at home, such as *At his feet* and *On his day*. Rather than having a 'churchy' emphasis, the domestic nature of the final lines of the hymn reflects the context in which it first appeared and a desire to foster faith in the home through reading and singing together.



The Lord Jesus Christ

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8.7.8.7. D.

ST. WINIFRED (*Second Tune*).

S. J. P. DUNMAN, 1843-1913.



1 CRADLED in a manger, meanly
Laid the Son of Man His head ;
Sleeping His first earthly slumber
Where the oxen had been fed.
Happy were those shepherds listening
To the holy angel's word ;
Happy they within that stable,
Worshipping their infant Lord.

2 Happy all who hear the message
Of His coming from above ;
Happier still who hail His coming,
And with praises greet His love.
Blessèd Saviour, Christ most holy,
In a manger Thou didst rest ;
Canst Thou stoop again, yet lower,
And abide within my breast ?

3 Evil things are there before Thee ;
In the heart, where they have fed,
Wilt Thou pitifully enter,
Son of Man, and lay Thy head ?
Enter, then, O Christ most holy ;
Make a Christmas in my heart ;
Make a heaven of my manger :
It is heaven where Thou art.

4 And to those who never listened
To the message of Thy birth,
Who have winter, but no Christmas
Bringing them Thy peace on earth,
Send to these the joyful tidings ;
By all people, in each home,
Be there heard the Christmas
anthem :
Praise to God, the Christ has come !
George Stringer Rowe, 1830-1913.