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Borthwick, Jane Laurie

(1813–1897)

Leon Litvack

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Borthwick, Jane Laurie (1813–1897), hymn writer and translator, was born on 9 April 1813 in Edinburgh, the first daughter of James Borthwick, insurance manager of the North British Insurance Office, and his wife, Sarah Finlay, both staunch members of the Free Church of Scotland. She collaborated with her sister **Sarah Laurie Findlater [née Borthwick] (1823–1907)**, who was born on 26 November 1823 in Edinburgh, to produce hymn translations from German.

Jane, the instigator of the translation project and the more prolific of the two sisters, was first introduced to German hymnody in the early 1840s, when she spent several months in Switzerland. On her return she was encouraged by her father to collaborate with Sarah on producing English renderings, some of which were first published in the *Free Church Magazine* in the late 1840s before being collected for inclusion in *Hymns from the Land of Luther* in four series (1854, 1855, 1858, 1862). These pietistic works, for which the Borthwick sisters are best known, confirmed their importance as mediators of German hymnody to Britain in the nineteenth century. Of the sixty-one translations by Jane, those which came into common use included 'Be still, my soul!' and 'Jesus, still lead on'; of Sarah's fifty-three, the best known were 'God calling yet!' and 'O happy home'. The importance Jane attached to her German translations—and indeed the success they attained—are confirmed by her using the pseudonym H.L.L., from the initials of the title, throughout her literary career. In 1875 she published a further book of thirty-three translations under the title *Alpine Lyrics*; these were added to the earlier volume to form a complete edition of *Hymns from the Land of Luther* in 1884.

Among Jane Borthwick's other interests were the education of the poor, and the domestic and foreign missionary work of the Free Church of Scotland. She held large classes in houses of refuge and reformatories in Edinburgh, and donated considerable sums to support large-scale conversion efforts in both Singapore and Labrador. She also used her literary skills to kindle enthusiasm for the Free Church's missionary efforts: she published *Missionary Evenings at Home* (1866) and *Missionary Enterprise in many Lands*

(1872), with the acknowledged aim of presenting what she called 'striking and picturesque facts of missionary history' in an effort to recruit young readers to her evangelical cause.

While she developed lasting friendships with individuals in Germany and Switzerland, Jane did little travelling, never married, and lived a quiet, religious life in Edinburgh, largely in the family home at 14 Claremont Crescent. Sarah went to live in Perthshire in 1861, after her marriage on 4 December of that year to Eric John Findlater (1813–1886), a Free Church minister. In her husband's parish of Balquhiddy, Sarah inaugurated a coffee house and library, as a diversion from what she considered the excessive drinking habits of the residents. After her husband's death in 1886 Sarah and her daughters Mary, Jane, and Sarah moved to Prestonpans, on the outskirts of Edinburgh. Jane Borthwick, then living at 18 Scotland Street, Edinburgh, was a frequent visitor, and developed a particularly close relationship with her nieces Jane Helen Findlater [see under Findlater, Mary Williamina] and Mary Williamina Findlater, who later became successful novelists, collaborating on a number of works, including *Crossriggs* (1908) and *Penny Money* (1911). Mary Findlater also published a tale entitled *A Narrow Way*, for which the character of Miss Cameron was based on Jane Borthwick. The two nieces acknowledged their Aunt Jane's kindness to them, but they grew tired of what they considered her excessive piety, apparent both in daily life and in her journal, which she kept throughout her adult life. They destroyed their aunt's journal after her death.

Jane Borthwick died of cardiac failure at 28 Ann Street, Edinburgh, on 7 September 1897, and was buried on 10 September in Greyfriars churchyard. In 1899 Sarah Findlater, together with her daughters, moved to Torquay; she died there on 25 December 1907.

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See also

Findlater, Jane Helen (1866–1946), novelist

Findlater, Mary Williamina (1865–1963), novelist