John Ellerton

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(1826–1893)

Alan Luff, revised by Leon Litvack

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Ellerton, John (1826–1893), hymn writer and editor of hymnals, was born on 16 December 1826 in Clerkenwell, London, the elder son of George Ellerton (1776–1844), of private means, who came from an evangelical Yorkshire family, and his wife, Jemima Frances, *née* Brown (1794/5–1866), who wrote short stories with religious themes for children. His early schooling in London was private. In 1838 his father inherited a small property in Ulverston in the Furness peninsula, Lancashire, and from there John attended King William's College, Isle of Man. In 1844 his father and younger brother died; his mother devoted her life thereafter to John, and shared his home for twenty years. After a year's study with the Revd C. Hodgson at Brathay vicarage, Ambleside, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1845, where he began a lifelong friendship with Henry Bradshaw and Dr Fenton Hort, and was influenced by the writings of F. D. Maurice. In 1848 he came second in the chancellor's medal competition with a poem 'The Death of Baldur'. Illness prevented him from sitting the honours examinations and he received an *aegrotat* in 1849, after which he spent a year in Scotland reading for holy orders.

Ellerton was ordained deacon in Chichester in 1850 and served his first curacy in Easebourne, Sussex, where he studied the writings of the Christian socialist movement, in particular those of Charles Kingsley. He was ordained priest in 1851. In 1852 Ellerton moved to become senior curate at Brighton parish church and to hold the evening lectureship at the chapel of ease, St Peter's. In 1859 he compiled *Hymns for Schools and Bible Classes*, in which a number of his own hymn texts were published.

In 1860 Ellerton became incumbent of the newly built church of St Michael and All Angels, Crewe Green, and domestic chaplain to Lord Crewe. He pursued his social concerns through his work at the London and North Western Railway Company's mechanics' institution in Crewe (of which he was vice-president). He reorganized its educational programme, and conducted classes in English and scripture history. He also organized one of the first choral associations in the midland area, which met at Nantwich. He

wrote many hymns and hymn translations in these years, and in 1863 the headmaster of Shrewsbury School consulted him when compiling *Hymnologia Christiana*. In 1871 he joined the group working on *Church Hymns* with W. Walsham How.

In 1872 Ellerton was appointed rector of Hinstock, Shropshire, where he began the research for *Notes and Illustrations of Church Hymns* (1881) and to compile with W. Walsham How *Children's Hymns and School Prayers* (1874). In 1876 he was appointed rector of the large parish of Barnes, Surrey, where he participated actively in the work of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK).

An attack of pleurisy in 1884 forced Ellerton's resignation from Barnes. After convalescence in Switzerland and Italy, in 1885 he became incumbent of the small parish of White Roding, Essex, and was invited to serve as consultant on a supplement to *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1889), which contained twenty-six of his hymns. In 1888 he published a definitive edition of his own texts in *Hymns Original and Translated*.

Ellerton married in 1860 Charlotte Alicia (*d.* 1896), daughter of William Hart of Brighton. They had seven sons and four daughters. Following a second stroke in 1892 he retired. While lying disabled by his last illness he was nominated to a prebendal stall in St Albans Cathedral, and for the final year of his life received the honorary address of Canon Ellerton, but he was never installed. He died on 15 June 1893 at Rosemont, Torquay, while on a visit there.

While Ellerton wrote a total of eighty-six hymns his greatest contribution to hymnody was as an editor and critical assessor. In compiling *Church Hymns* for the SPCK he pleaded for the inclusion of hymns from a variety of traditions. He was also keen to provide notes and illustrations to the hymns for a general readership, believing that accessibility should be a prime feature of congregational singing. His work as an editor also taught him to appreciate the practical value of hymnals, and the diversity of local practice and theological opinion; this led him to oppose the introduction of authorized or official hymnals for particular communions. His own compositions were marked by a sensitive use of imagery and wide parish appeal; 'The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended' was chosen by Queen Victoria as one of the hymns for her diamond jubilee in 1897.

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