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(1793–1847)

Leon Litvack

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Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847)

by George Henry Phillips (after John King, c. 1831)

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Lyte, Henry Francis (1793–1847), hymn writer, was born on 1 June 1793 at The Cottage, Ednam, near Kelso, Roxburghshire, the second son of Captain Thomas Lyte (*d.* 1850) and Anna Maria Oliver, and a descendant of the botanist Henry Lyte and the genealogist Thomas Lyte. His parents appear never to have been married, though Anna Maria was always referred to as Mrs Lyte. Thomas Lyte's military career necessitated frequent moves, and the family followed him to Edinburgh, Newmarket, Manchester, and Liverpool, before settling in Ireland in 1797. They first resided at Ballyshannon, and then in

Dunmore, co. Galway. When the couple separated in 1801 Henry stayed with his father and his brother Thomas, and was then sent to Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, in October 1803. He missed his mother greatly, and rarely saw his father, who was away for long periods on military duty. Because he spent both the terms and the holidays at the school, he developed a close relationship with Dr Burrowes, the headmaster, who became a surrogate father to the boy, taking over his financial responsibilities and eventually becoming his guardian. It was while at Portora that Lyte began to compose poetry.

Lyte entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1811, and distinguished himself academically by winning a university scholarship in 1813, and the chancellor's prize for English verse in three successive years. He graduated BA in February 1814, and considered a career in medicine; this course of study was soon abandoned in favour of holy orders, and he was ordained deacon on 18 December 1814. His first curacy was in Taghmon, co. Wexford, where he stayed for eighteen months, but his frequent attacks of asthma led him to resign this post. He then travelled through France on horseback from September 1816 to summer 1817. After his return to England, Lyte was moved from one curacy to another before eventually being given a position at the chapel of ease in Marazion, Cornwall, on 24 June 1817. On 21 January 1818 he married Anne, daughter and eventual heir of the Revd W. Maxwell of Falkland, co. Monaghan. The couple lived at Nevada House, Fore Street, where on 29 September 1818 Anne gave birth to their first son, Henry William. It was while at Marazion that Lyte underwent a spiritual experience at the deathbed of a neighbouring clergyman, Abraham Swanne. Lyte claimed that this encounter altered his whole view of life: he emerged with a deeper faith, and preached with a new vitality.

In January 1820 the family left for Sway (near Lymington), Hampshire, to live in temporary retirement; it was here that Lyte produced many of his poems. The couple's first daughter, Ann Maria, was born in January 1821, but died a month later. Early in 1822 the family moved to Bramble Torr, a house near Dittisham, Devon; here a second daughter, Anna Maria, was born on 20 April. Lyte held no full-time position at Dittisham, but while there he was asked to do temporary duty at the chapel of ease at Lower Brixham. In May 1822 he was invited by the trustees of the chapel to remain at Brixham permanently. He refused, and went instead to Charleton, where he became curate on 6 July 1822. He stayed for almost two years, before moving back to Brixham in April 1824.

Lyte began by ministering in two churches, St Mary's Church, Brixham, and the new district church of Lower Brixham. He joined the schools committee, and by June 1824 had become its chairman. He took a keen interest in the development of education, and in addition to conducting annual school examinations he established the first Sunday school in the Torbay area; he also undertook to teach in his recently established Sailors' Sunday School. A second son, John Walker, was born on 2 January 1826. On 13 July 1826 Lyte was instituted as the first incumbent of Lower Brixham, and the

family moved to Burton House in Burton Street. A third son, Farnham, was born on 10 January 1828. Early in 1833 the Lytes moved from Burton House to Berry Head House. Henry added to his income by taking resident pupils, who were tutored alongside his own children. He also published *Poems, Chiefly Religious* (1833; 2nd edn, 1841), which contained some of his early hymns, notable for their scriptural emphasis. In 1834 his *Spirit of the Psalms* was published, which contained one of his best-known hymns, 'Praise, my soul, the king of heaven'. By this time Lyte's health was deteriorating, along with his chances of obtaining any preferment; in 1835 he sought appointment as the vicar of Crediton, but was turned down on account of his increasingly debilitating asthma and bronchitis.

During the 1840s Lyte spent increasing periods abroad. First he holidayed in Norway in the summer of 1842. He then decided to spend the winter of 1844 in Naples, but his progress was hampered by illness, and he spent considerably more time abroad than he had wished; finally he returned to England in May 1846. By August he was off to the continent again, intending to winter in Rome; he ended up staying until May 1847, and returned to England in June, in very poor health. He spent the summer at Berry Head, where he wrote his most famous hymn, 'Abide with me'. He left for the continent again on 1 October 1847. By 5 November he had reached Nice, where he was seized by influenza and dysentery. He died at the Hôtel de la Pension Anglaise on 20 November, ministered to by Henry Manning (later archbishop of Westminster), and was buried in the grounds of the Anglican chapel in the old cemetery, Nice. In 1848 his extensive library, chiefly theology and old English poetry, was sold in London over seventeen days. A volume of *Remains*, consisting of poems, sermons, and letters, was published in 1850; it included 'Abide with me', which was first sung (to his own tune) at his memorial service in Brixham in 1847. Though his poetic energies were directed at scripturally and evangelically minded audiences, his lyric gift was universally appreciated. The example of 'Abide with me' is instructive: intensely personal and contemplative, yet nationally popular—even being sung (always, after its publication in 1861, to W. H. Monk's tune, 'Eventide') on secular occasions such as at football matches, and especially, since 1927, at the English cup final. A memorial tablet to Lyte was placed in Westminster Abbey in 1947.

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Likenesses

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J. King, oils, Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, Northern Ireland

G. H. Phillips, mezzotint (after J. King, 1831), BM [see illus.]

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See also

Lyte, Henry (1529?-1607), botanist and antiquary

Lyte, Thomas (1568-1638), genealogist

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National Portrait Gallery <http://www.npg.org.uk/live/search/person.asp?LinkID=mp06213>