"The songs of love": David Willson's hymns for children

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David Willson was a visionary famous in his own lifetime (1778-1866) for his controversial theological writings, for the many poems and hymns he composed, and for the utopian community, the Children of Peace, which he helped to build at Sharon, Ontario. Today he is best-known as the architect of the Sharon Temple, erected from 1825-1831.

Attention to Willson's musical works, however, is being renewed lately because of the annual "Music at Sharon" festival that attracts full houses in the Temple and is subsequently broadcast on C.B.C. radio. No music that Willson composed survives, but from contemporary reports we may learn the names of the tunes the Sharon Silver Band played.[1] Fascinating to the student of literature, though, are the many — over one thousand — hymn verses that Willson published in two volumes in 1846 and 1849. In the *Encyclopedia of music in Canada,* John Beckwith observes that Willson's hymns "have a clarity, sincerity, and found-poetry charm comparable to the naive painted banners of the sect."[2] Read with the whole of Willson's writings,[3] the hymns are also poetic expressions of aspects of Willson's profound theology. His hymns written especially for children reward study with a clear impression of Willson's visionary insights.

David Willson's literary activities subsequent to the prolific mid-1830s diminished to the extent that, besides memorial broadsides and occasional poems in newspapers, Willson published nothing until 1846. In that year he collected and printed *Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon to be sung in worship on Sabbath days* (Newmarket: G.S. Porter).

The child, to David Willson, was a catalyst in many dimensions of his potent imagination. When Willson and some of his friends broke with the Quakers at Yonge Street Meeting, Newmarket, in 1812, Willson named their new society the Children of Peace, an echo both of the Quakers' original name, Children of the Light, and of the Biblical Children of Israel. William Lyon Mackenzie reports, following his 1828 visit to the Children of Peace at Hope (the name of the Village was changed to Sharon in 1841[4]), that two schools were thriving there: a small one for the ordinary subjects and a much larger one for the education of young women in a variety of practical sciences.[5] Throughout the manifold works Willson wrote, from the first (1814) to the last (a poem for children, on Christmas Day, 1865) the child image occurs extraordinarily

frequently.

The epigraph of the 1846 collection of hymns for children, Willson's first published collection of hymns, indicates that he is not using the term "children" figuratively, as he sometimes does, for instance, in the name, "Children of Peace." The book's epigraph is from Matthew 21, 16:

> Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings
> thou hast perfected praise.

These words are Jesus' response on the first Palm Sunday to the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem, who were "sore displeased" (Matt. 21, 15) both by Jesus' having cast out of the temple the bankers and merchants, and by "the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the son of David" (Matt. 21, 15). One implication of the Bible story, the one encapsulated in the sentence Willson chose for his book's epigraph, that literary or theological sophistication are not required in order to recognize and respond to the truth, is a recurrent theme in Willson's works.

He reiterates his belief in *Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon* in a prefatory note, "To the public":

> The composer of this little work has not tried to imitate the skillful and learned Poet, in rhyming hymns; but rather to aim at simple truths by sentences easy to be understood, yet comprehensive in their measure; without even pretending to publish the eloquence of poetry, but the lines of experience: without the least sense or sentiment of this work being superior to others; but to be received as that which is according to divine favour, justly *our own*.[6]

The final description of the work in this sentence, "justly *our own*," strikes an aggressive note that proclaims confidence and pride in the achievements of the Children of Peace, as well as their independence of wordly considerations. Perhaps this suggestion of complacency in Willson's words may be interpreted most appropriately as evidence of his sense of the vindication of the Children of Peace's principles, as the group peacefully prospered in their village, proving fallacious the nasty judgments outsiders had been pronouncing since the break with the Society of Friends in 1812.[7]

To delve deeply into the enormous topic of hymnology is not necessary here, but a little background helps one to understand Willson's hymns. In the English language, the century 1750 to 1850 is considered to be "The Great Century"[8] of hymnody, largely because of the works of John Newton (1725-1807) and William Cowper (1731-1800). In the large perspective of English-language hymnody David Willson's hymns may be viewed as participating in this great flowering. Certainly, in the context of Canada, David Willson is the major hymnodist of the period.

The manifestation of the English tradition of hymnody with which Willson

was likely most familiar is the Presbyterian metrical Psalms. These exhibit many qualities that suggest Willson knew them. Moreover, Willson himself states that he was born of "poor, but pious Presbyterian parents."[9] The Presbyterian kirk, following Calvin's strictures concerning liturgical music, for long maintained that the *Church's Only Manual of Praise*[10] is the Psalms from the Bible. The rationale for this position is based on the Calvinist belief in the depravity of man's nature.

Nevertheless, the Presbyterian elders found quite acceptable the singing of versions of the Psalms not only translated into the English vernacular, but also into simplified metres in order to facilitate their singing and accompaniment. These types of "human ingenuity," which first arose in Scotland,[11] are acceptable, according to the Presbyterians on an 1858-59 committee, because the approved versifiers, such as Thomas Sternhold (d. 1549), John Hopkins (d. 1570), and Francis Rous (1579-1658), faithfully adhered to the "sentiment of the Holy Spirit."[12]

The paraphrased Psalms were couched in one or more of three metres, normally: common, long, and short. These and a few variants, such as double common and hallelujah, were standard throughout the nineteenth century and they adapt easily to the wide variety of tunes also composed in these standard metres. The title of an 1831 version of metrical Psalms indicates the qualities prized by Presbyterian worshippers:

The Psalms of David in Metre. Translated and Diligently Compared with the Original Text, and Former Translations. More Plain, Smooth, and Agreeable to the Text than any Heretofore.[13]

Psalm 33, as translated in this Psalter, is a good example to show the similarities between the styles of the metrical Psalms and David Willson's hymns:

Ye righteous, in the Lord rejoice;
  it comely is and right
That upright men, with thankful voice,
  should praise the Lord of might. Praise
God with harp, and unto him
  sing with the psaltery;
Upon a ten-string'd instrument
  make ye sweet melody. . .[14]

For Willson, the move to expressing his own beliefs in a form similar to the metrical Psalms, with which he was very likely acquainted in his youth, would not have been too difficult. His Hymn XV: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", from the *Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon,* is in the same metre as the above Psalm 33, alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines:

Give us this day our daily bread,
  Our hearts for more prepare,
Let us like to the lambs be fed
  That's in a shepherd's care.

Keep us whene'er temptations move
  To wander from thy name,
O Jesus, feed us on they love
  And far remove our pain.[15]

It is also plain to see why Willson could with justification, and without the presumptuousness charged to him by casual acquaintances,[16] consider that he was continuing the work of King David, the writer of the Bible's Psalms.

The one hundred and fifty-three hymns in *Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon* mostly partake of the traditional pastoral vision in that they simplify complex matters and express abstractions through concrete images. In the very first hymn, in fact, two different shepherd figures appear. This is the hymn, entitled, "The love of God to little children":

O Lord, thou art a Father dear
  Thou art our shepherd and our bread,
And when we weep thine ear doth hear,
  By thee we're cloth'd and we're fed.

Thou dost our house and home prepare,
  There to receive thy children's feet,
Thou givest us songs of praise and prayer
  On every sabbath to repeat.

We have a shepherd soft and kind,
  From thee we know his spirit came,
He feeds out heart and clothes our mind
  With songs of glory to thy name.[17]

This idyllic hymn is succeeded by Hymn II, "Children loving the Lord," in which Willson's awareness of the dualities of life, only mentioned in Hymn I's "when we weep," begins to take a more predominant role. Willson gives the children beautiful similes for themselves to sing in the first two stanzas, but in the third there are hints of the conditional nature of blessings:

We love our altar and our praise
We offer on the sabbath days;
We love to in thy house be seen,
Like young cedars, fresh and green.

Like to the rose in Sharon grew,
Blest with the rain and silver dew;
Array'd like flocks around thy throne,
We praise thy name and bless our home.

To thee, O Lord, we humbly pray,
Be with us every sabbath day,

Nor let us wander far abroad,
The day that we should praise our God. (p. 2)

The similes that end the first stanza and begin the second also end the first chapter of the Song of Solomon and begin the second. The "altar" in Willson's opening line is the Temple still standing in Sharon. Those who have visited the building will recall that the pillars supporting the centre of the structure are named — labelled with small metal plates — after the twelve apostles, and Faith, Hope, Charity, and Love, an architectural allusion to the new Jerusalem described in Revelation 21, 14:

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The words Willson writes for the children of Sharon, then, conflate three distinct realities: their Sharon, of which the children are the "young cedars" supporting their temple; Solomon's temple and his bride, who says, "I am the Rose of Sharon" (Song of Solomon 2, 1); and the apocalyptic vision of St. John who not only describes the named foundations of new Jerusalem, but precisely pictures the Lamb on a throne in heaven (Revelation 4, 2). More important than the question whether the young Davidites would have been aware of this conflation of meanings in their hymn is the evincement of Willson's poetic strategy of overlapping layers of significance to create an eternal perspective in words.

To return to thematic aspects, one discovers that by Hymn VI, "The wicked shall be forgotten of the Lord," the loss of pastoral innocence is overtly confronted. Although the piece is called a hymn, its form suggests that the children might have read or recited it:

How mournful, Jesus, I must be,
If thou dost cease to care for me;
How in the desert I shall cry,
I'm sick, and in my sins I'll die.
I see my father for me weep,
My mother mourns and cannot sleep;
Where'er I stray they follow me,
And all my sinful deeds they see.
They pray for mercy and for care,
But Christ has gone and left me there;
I'm like a lamb that has no rest,
My mind is wand'ring and distress'd;
Oh! children dear, my sorrows see,
And never be a child like me. (p. 4)

The next hymn (VII), "A time to mourn," pursues this threatening topic in less hypothetical terms:

. . . I did forget his holy name,

Some idle toys I saw,
Though I was well, I now have pain,
I did forget his law. (p. 5)

Hymn VIII, "The children's blessing," enacts the forgiveness that eases the painful condition occasioned by the forgetting of God's "holy name" in Hymn VII. In Hymn VIII another speaker ascends the stage to comfort the children in rhythms that lighten the vividly imagined gloom:

Dear children I love,
The Lord is so plain,
I'm soft as the dove,
As harmless my name...

Oh! children agree,
Remove from strife,
And whither you be,
I'll bless you with life.

Your days will be long,
Your sorrows be few,
I'll give you a song,
That ever is new. (p. 5)

Continuing the dramatic enactment of the process of redemption, Hymn IX, "Children rejoicing in the favours of God," returns to the children's voices in response to the divine promise of "a song, / That ever is new":

Now we sing our joyful blessings,
See our sins and sorrows o'er,
Jesus is his own embracing,
Jesus has the richest store.

He is like the morning beaming,
Like the sun with spreading rays,
He is like the water streaming,
From the fountain of his praise.

He the union cord is binding,
Now we sing the songs of love,
Every day we seek, we find him,
Wise, and harmless as the dove.

He delights to walk before us,
Heaven and joy are in his way,
To him we sing the lasting chorus,
Teach us Lord to sing and pray. (p.6)

Especially striking is Willson's simile comparing Jesus to "the water streaming, / From the fountain of his praise." The image suggests a circular, symbiotic relation between Jesus and His people. Through Jesus, human praise

is transformed into "Heaven and joy" for the people praising. For Willson this cyclical intimacy with Christ is a fundamental part of his world view. In *The acting principles of life,* published in 1835, Willson states a fact that is corroborated by the enormous number of hymns he left:

> I never repeat one communication twice over, nor sing one old hymn in worship: bread from heaven is our lot — descending mercies.[18]

This statement not only demonstrates Willson's sense of gratitude for divine inspiration, and his integration with the process of praise, but also points to the source of his association of the Children of Peace in their wilderness home in Upper Canada with the ancient Israelites fed on manna by God during their wanderings in the desert after the Egyptian captivity (Exodus 16, 35). Willson's poetic imagery rises from a profoundly held conviction of cosmic repetition revealed to the mystic as unity in an eternal perspective. To sing hymns and to pray to God are what is required of mankind to participate in God's love. No wonder, then, that Willson was incompatible with the Society of Friends that forbade singing or any other ceremony at its meetings.

Ending with the children's request, "Teach us Lord to sing and pray," this series of nine hymns — and because most are addressed to God, they are also prayers — poetically reveals the child's progress from paradisal innocence to the fall that inculcates a consciousness of human inadequacy and the absolute need for God's redeeming love; and from this stage to a life of following Jesus' commandments, a life of praise and thanksgiving. The two closing verses of Hymn XIII, "The blessings of God to children," summarize this cyclical movement and present the miraculous sense of the change as a child might perceive it:

> Why, O Jesus, didst thou love us?
> We are oft inclin'd to sin,
> Heaven and God are far above us,
> Hast thou come to take us in?
>
> Thou hast come with crowns of glory,
> Prepare, O Lord, my sinful head,
> Let me e'er repeat the story,
> Jesus has my spirit fed. (pp. 8-9)

This resolve to "e'er repeat the story," also stated in Hymn I, and in many of Willson's other hymns, is an important concept for achieving an overview of Willson's hymnody for children. Repetition, the overlapping of times and places in an infinite field of vision, operates both macroscosmically and microcosmically. Most succinctly, this perspective may be appreciated through Willson's understanding of the Genesis story of Creation: the events occur in the mind of Moses and of each person, but also macrocosmically, in the world after Adam, the mind of God.[19] For Willson, repetition is a universal and fundamental principle. Repetition — ever repeating the story, as Willson says in

his Hymn XIII for children — operates in the individual's everyday life. The "story" Willson refers to is the Bible, and simultaneously it is the life of Jesus that the Bible teaches, and that individual human beings live or repeat. This taking on of the life of Jesus is the broad meaning of "praise" as Willson uses the word. To repeat the praise of God for the mercies he shows is also a primary component of the Christ-like life. Hymn XXVII, "The visions of Light," presents an image of the Church as a mother and at once focusses the phenomenon of repetition on the verbal and the experiential levels:

I see the Church in glory shine,
  And children at her feet;
And every song she gives sublime
  For children to repeat.

She shows to us a naked breast,
  And wisdom's drawing there;
We see, with her, the saints at rest,
  And a Redeemer's prayer.

With kingly glory she's array'd,
  And with a golden crown,
Salvation bears upon her head
  From heaven she came down.

The stars of light around her shine,
  Each servant of the Lord,
Both in the old and latter time
  She doth in truth record.

She celebrates King David's name,
  Her son sits on his throne,
And oh! she comes to us again
  To make her glory known. (pp. 18-19)

What Willson is attempting to communicate to the Children of Sharon in these hymns is that for human beings, enclosed in the worldly confines of time and space, the mantric process of repeating praise is the most appropriate and effectual way to gain release in order to participate in eternal reality.

Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon continues to enact the cyclical movement from joyous unity with God to an elegiac sense of sinfulness and loss, and back again to unity through Christ's love, a pattern that parallels the Bible's structure. For children, the singing of these hymns would have been both an education in the verities of living on earth, and a source of consolation. For the people listening, the children's voices singing Willson's words must have been very poignant also.

In some of the hymns for children Willson published in 1846, his ecstasy lifts him to heights of beauty which he expresses with directness and simplicity within his metrical frame. To quote just one example, this is Hymn XXX, "The thoughts of the righteous":

When I think on the works of God,
  How wonderful, how kind,
My spirit flies so far abroad
  I hardly know my mind.

Why am I born? my soul doth say,
  A God so kind to see?
His works in heaven, so far away,
  His stars of light to me.

To see the glory of the sun
  So often set and rise,
And to believe there's worlds to come
  More glorious in mine eyes.

To see the often changing moon,
  And tides and oceans roll,
To think upon the silent tomb,
  The purpose of my soul.
My heart doth swell, I burst in tears,
  To think I have a foe;
But a still voice is in mine ears;
  All this doth glory show. (pp. 20-21)

Besides hymns that express Willson's visionary understanding of aspects of human life, he also writes for the children of Sharon hymns that are inspired by less-than-glorious mundane circumstances. The atmosphere during the Children of Peace's service must have been rather tense on the day that the children sang Hymn LIII, for instance; "A SONG. — The sin of destroying the peace and joy of little birds":

Oh! what a mournful thing to see
The little robin, on the tree
Her nest destroyed by wicked boys,
Her house and home, and all her joys.
And ev'ry bird that houses build
Are wonderful, by nature skill'd;
No prince on earth could build a nest
Where little birds with joy could rest.
I hate the pride that keeps a cage,
That prisons in the younger age;
With songs to touch the thoughtless ear,
'T would not like to the bird appear.
Our children hate the prison door!
It makes them pale and makes them poor;
It makes the parents hearts to cry
Like the robb'd birds which round us fly.
Now think of parting with your young!
And what you have to others done!
And let the little captives free
As they were born on earth to be:
And leave them in their skill-built nest,

For God, like us, the birds have bless'd. (pp. 37-38)

Hymns that chastise in this homely manner are rare in Willson's works. However, particularly towards the end of the *Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon,* the hymns' titles indicate that they are intended for other special observations. There are eight "Hymns for Christmas Morning;" six "For the Illumination Evening," the planting and harvest festivals when the Temple was lit with hundreds of candles; and eleven hymns "For a Communion Day." These occasional hymns suggest again how far removed from the Society of Friends the Children of Peace had grown over the years: Quakers believed that every day is sacred to God and that special holy days are superfluous. Willson's hymns for seasonal observances reveal another dimension of the theme of repetition noted before. In this case the repetition takes shape in imitation of the annual cycles of nature that the Christian year also parallels.

Along with the tendency to repeat themes, metres and images in Willson's hymns, another trend is also evident. This layer of meaning begins to manifest itself through the claim of Willson's that he never used the same hymn twice. The village of Sharon with its lovely buildings, and the Children of Peace's creative, altruistic lives during much of the nineteenth century, are also indications of the spiritual stage that Willson's hymns for children corroborate. Hymn CLII, "Communion Hymn," puts this condition into words:

'Tis thou, O Lord! the bread prepares
That feeds thy flock on earth below;
'Tis thou that hear'st the mourners' pray'rs
And giv'st them bread and water too.

A space of time is in our trust,
And thou impart'st thy grace and love;
In a few days we turn to dust,
Then call our souls to rise above:

To where there's no distinction reigns,
Where all they servants well agree;
Where thou blott'st out our creeds and names
And every soul doth worship thee.

So let this day they kingdom show,
And pray on earth thy will be done,
Lord, let our souls they spirit know,
To all, thy name and kingdom come.

When we're assembled, Lord, to eat,
Let us be mindful of thy praise;
And for thy love, thy praise repeat,
For blessing us with peaceful days. (pp. 107-108)

Realizing that children would have been repeating these words as their own, one discovers the centre of Willson's imaginative identification of children,

young human beings, with a state potential in adulthood. In *The great code,* Northrop Frye describes this state that Willson communicates in his hymns as almost inevitable:

> Metaphors of unity and integration take us only so far, because they are derived from the finiteness of the human mind. If we are to expand our vision into the genuinely infinite, that vision becomes decentralized. We follow a 'way' or direction until we reach the state of innocence symbolized by the sheep in the twenty-third Psalm, where we are back to wandering, but where wandering no longer means being lost.[20]

Considering Willson's understanding of creation, his visions of overlapping circles of repetition in an eternal context, one finds no surprise in this return to Eden expressed both by the settlement of Sharon in Upper Canada, and by Willson's hymns for children's voices.

The final hymn of *Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon* turns on the same image of sheep that Frye cites, and also that the first hymn for children employs. This hymn (CLIII), "The favours of the Lord," perfectly expresses the condition of innocent wandering that Willson sees as both the beginning and the end of life:

O Lord, thy grace and truth we own,
Alone on thee our souls depend!
Grant unto all thy name be known,
That none this day thine heart offend.

Place all our feet with fear and care,
Like to a flock that follows thee;
Let thanks be in our evening pray'r
And let our eyes thy favours see...

Thy majesty on high we own,
And love thy precepts here below;
As children bow before thy throne,
As lambs that do a shepherd know. (p. 108)

That Willson sets this hymn in the choir of children demonstrates once again the intensity with which he imagined his world. Children singing words that apply equally to themselves and to the adult congregation, the Children of Peace, all engaged in singing and living the "lasting theme," glorifying God, present an image of the interpenetration of the material and spiritual worlds that David Willson so ardently communicates.

NOTES

[1]William Lyon Mackenzie, *The advocate* (Toronto, Feb. 27, 1934).
[2]John Beckwith, "Hymnbooks, Protestant," *Encyclopedia of music in Canada,* eds. H. Kallman, G. Potvin, K. Winters (Toronto, 1981), p. 442.
[3]A complete bibliography of Willson's works appears in Thomas Gerry, "David Willson (1778-1866): Canadian Visionary Writer and Hymnodist," Diss. University of Western

Ontario 1983, pp. 292-304.

[4]"Department Order" of the General Post Office, dated Quebec, 6th February, 1841 (Public Archives of Canada, Records of the Post Office, REcord Group 3, vol. 1171).

[5]William Lyon Mackenzie, *Sketches of Canada and the United States* (London, England, 1833), p. 120.

[6]David Willson, *Hymns and prayers for the children of Sharon to be sung in worship on Sabbath Days* (Newmarket, 1846), unumbered page.

[7]See, for example, Thomas Rolph, *A descriptive and statistical account of Canada* (London, England, 1841), pp. 185-186; and D. Wilkie, *Sketches of a summer trip to New York and the Canadas* (Edinburgh, 1837), pp. 203-204.

[8]Eric Routley, *Hymns and human life* (London, England, 1952), p. 75 (chapter subtitle).

[9]David Willson, *A collection of items of the life of David Willson* (Newmarket, 1853), p. 8.

[10]J.M. Willson, J.T. Cooper, R.J. Black, William Sterret, *The true psalmody; or the Bible psalms: the church's's only manual of praise* (Philadelphia, 1859), title page.

[11]H.A. Glass, *The story of the psalters* (London, England, 1888), p. 12.

[12]Willson, Cooper, *et al., The true psalmody,* p. 226.

[13]Anon., *The psalms of David in metre...* (Edinburgh and London, 1831), title page.

[14]Anon., *The psalms of David in metre...*, p. 24.

[15]Willson, *Hymns and prayers,* p. 10.

[16]See Rolph and Wilkie (note 7).

[17]Willson, *Hymns and prayers,* p. 1. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[18]David Willson, *The impressions of the mind: to which are added some remarks on church and state discipline, and the acting principles of life* (Toronto, 1835), p. 254.

[19]See David Willson, *An address to the professors of religion* (New York, 1817), p. 14.

[20]Northrop Frye, *The great code: the Bible and literature* (Toronto, 1982), p. 168.

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