

Ephrata Hymns and Hymn-Books.



The early history of Ephrata in this county has been so frequently discussed that to present an additional paper on the same general subject may appear like "carrying coals to Newcastle." I can well remember the time when the theme was regarded as peculiarly mysterious and fascinating. Many obscurities have, however, been removed by the research of eminent antiquarians, and by the publication of Dr. Hark's translation of the "Chronicon Ephratense;" so that, I think, it would now be possible to compose a connected history of the "Order of the Solitary," especially if the author had sufficient courage and judgment to ignore the wild legends and unreliable traditions which are still occasionally repeated. On this occasion I shall not attempt a task which has been done so well by others, but will limit my observations to a small part of the literary work of a peculiar

people. I shall not venture to tell a "thrice told tale," though it may be found desirable to present an introductory account of the origin and early history of a strange religious and social organization. From an article, entitled "Early German Hymnology of Pennsylvania," which I contributed to the Reformed Quarterly Review in 1882, I shall take the liberty of quoting freely.

A few words of introduction may be necessary to the comprehension of the peculiarities of the German "Separatists" who, at the invitation of William Penn, found a refuge in Pennsylvania. When the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 concluded the terrible Thirty Years war, liberty of conscience was allowed to the three great religious parties, Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed, and a kind of protection was promised to the Jews. All other forms of religion were condemned under the general name of Anabaptists; and it was made the duty of the various governments to prevent "the sects" from holding religious assemblies. In the days of the Reformation there had been certain socialistic bodies, known as Anabaptists, which waged war against the princes, and had finally been almost exterminated with fire and sword. The governments of Germany could never forget the excesses of Thomas Münzer and John of Leyden, and the mild communities that succeeded them were most unjustly persecuted under the pretext that they too were Anabaptists. In all the history of Europe there is nothing more shameful than the treatment that was accorded to the Mennonites, Schwenkfelders and other "separatist" bodies. Official protection was accorded to the Mennonites in only four small provinces--Holstein, Cleves, Moers (including Crefeld) and Wied--

but they were generally tolerated in the Free Cities, and in Holland they secured so great a degree of liberty that they became a wealthy and intelligent body.

There is probably no one in these days who would attempt to excuse the attitude of the German princes in those depressing times; but it should not be forgotten that the government of church and state was alike harsh, not to say merciless. All churches—Catholic and Protestant—were oppressed when the representatives of a rival organization happened to be in power.

In the latter part of the seventeenth century, and the beginning of the eighteenth, occurred a great religious awakening, which for a time added greatly to the prevailing confusion. It was known by the general name of Pietism, though it included many parties which differed greatly from each other in doctrine and purpose. Koch in his "Kirchenlied" recognizes three great parties among the Pietists: 1. The Mystics. 2. The Pietists Proper, and 3, The Moravians. The pioneer of the whole Pietist movement was Jean de Labadie (1610-1674), a Reformed minister who had in early life been a Roman Catholic priest; a man of wonderful eloquence, but inclined to fanaticism. He finally became a thorough mystic, and his followers, who were called Labadists, were probably the first to introduce Protestant monasticism into America. The most eminent exponent of Pietism, properly so called, was Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), of the Lutheran Church. He was devout and conservative, and the revival of genuine Christian life in the established churches was mainly due to his efforts. The Pietists in the proper sense remained attached to the old

churches, though in many instances they formed peculiar associations for the cultivation of the religious life. The Mystics on the other hand were indifferent, if not hostile, to the churches and among themselves cultivated a kind of philosophy which often led to inexcusable excesses. They studied the writings of Jacob Boehme (or Behmen) who has been called "the inspired shoemaker of Gorlitz," and cultivated anew such doubtful sciences as alchemy and necromancy. It was in this mystical spirit that many early pioneers came to America, of whom Whittier tells us that they spent their time in

"Reading the books of Daniel and of
John,
And Behmen's 'Morning Redness,'
through the stone
Of wisdom, vouchsafed to their eyes
alone."

In external matters, such as dress and social habits, the mystics closely approached the earlier socialist organizations to which we have referred, and they generally acquiesced in the "peace doctrines" which the latter had so earnestly advocated. It is hardly necessary to add that they became divided into many sects, of which the majority have passed away, though a few of the more conservative still exist and in their own way are doing much good.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of this mystical movement was the revival of monasticism among Protestants and the cultivation of a peculiar kind of Christian socialism. The first among Protestants to found a mystical monastic brotherhood in Germany, was Johann Friederich Rock (1687-1749), the leader of a sect called "The Inspired," who were at one time quite numerous in Pennsylvania, but have long been extinct. They derived

much of their spirit from the "Prophets of the Cevennes," a party which appeared in the Reformed church of France in the days of persecution. They were very enthusiastic and in their services were frequently attacked by violent convulsions. Several of their leaders—Gleim, Gruber and Mackinet—came to America and lived in Germantown. In Germany, after Rock's death, they maintained a feeble existence; but about 1853, under the leadership of Metz and Weber, they emigrated to America and founded "Ebenezer," near Buffalo, N. Y., and the Amana society in Iowa.

The Labadists at an early period founded monastic institutions on Long Island, on the Wissahickon near Philadelphia, and at Bohemia Manor, in Maryland, all in hope of living in retirement from the world and thus becoming prepared for the speedy coming of the Lord. The history of these brotherhoods is interesting, but it is not properly included in our present theme. We have merely mentioned them to show how the way was prepared for the establishment of the Order of the Solitary at Ephrata.

Conrad Beissel, the founder of that peculiar brotherhood, was in many respects an interesting personage. His biography was first composed by his associates for the "Chronicon Ephratense," and has been often rewritten, so that it is not necessary to enlarge upon it. It may be remembered that he was born at Eberbach in the Palatinate in 1690, and died at Ephrata in 1768. In his early life there was little to attract the attention of the world. He was the youngest son of a drunken baker, and his mother died when he was eight years old, so that in his youth he had a very hard time. The "Chronicon," however, tells us that the

Spirit thus indicated that he was to be a priest after the order of Melchisedek, who was not dependent for his dignities on his father and mother. He received very little formal instruction, but, according to the only account which we possess, he was wonderfully precocious, acquiring all the learning



CONRAD BEISSEL.

which he desired by a kind of intuition without conscious effort. Such talents, it must be confessed, would be very desirable, especially for those of us who had to work hard for every fragment of knowledge which we have been able to collect. He acquired a good deal of general information, became a fluent writer, and was a natural musician. I do not doubt that there was in him a strain of genius; but it might have been said of him, as the learned Scaliger said of another: "He was in some respects wiser than an ordinary man and in others less intelligent than a boy." He himself said

in later years that he had never known a time when he was not fully convinced that he had been chosen by Providence for a grand and glorious mission.

Beissel became a baker, and for some years worked at his trade. Even in his daily work, said his disciples, there was something miraculous, so that all his customers insisted on receiving no other bread than that which he had kneaded. His employer's wife, however, did not like him, and on one occasion, when she had scolded him, he retorted by calling her "Jezebel;" whereupon she drove him out of the house. Then, we are naively informed, he was convinced of the evils of the married state, and became a life-long advocate of celibacy. He read a great deal of mystical theology, and became an active opponent of the established church. A foolish law required of each citizen a certificate of church attendance; and the local pastor offered him such a certificate if he would agree to walk through the parish church once a year on a weekday, but he indignantly refused. He was determined to be a martyr at all hazards; so he took his dismissal and put himself under the care of Rock and his Inspirationists. Here, no doubt, he acquired many of the peculiarities which characterized his work in later years. He also came into contact with the Baptists of Schwarzenau, and for some time he felt strongly drawn to that organization.

When Beissel emigrated to America, in 1720, it was mainly for the purpose of living the life of a hermit somewhere in the wilderness. After lingering a year in Germantown he removed to Conestoga, where for some time he lived in comparative re-

tirement. The little congregation which he established was recognized by the German Baptists (Dunkers), and he was himself baptized; but the differences between the two organizations—especially with regard to the celebration of the Sabbath—were too decided to render a permanent union possible. Left to themselves, Beissel and his followers developed peculiarities which separated them from all other denominations of Christians.

In the organization of the brotherhood we behold an exact analogy to the early history of oriental monasticism. The leader was at first a hermit; then a company of his admirers gathered around him, in order that they might enjoy the benefits of his constant presence; and finally when the number became large, rules of government were adopted by which they became almost unconsciously transformed into a monastic order.

The most marvellous feature of the Ephrata brotherhood was the extraordinary influence of its founder. Men like the Eckerleins, Conrad Weiser and Peter Miller, who were intellectually his superiors, bowed to his spiritual power. At the present day it might be said by some people that he possessed wonderful hypnotic powers.

I shall not attempt to tell the story of the industrial development of the institutions at Ephrata. Their various departments were conducted with energy and success; but of them all there was none that possessed so high a degree of interest for subsequent generations as the work of printing and publication. At their best estate the monks conducted their literary enterprises without extrinsic aid. They were not only authors and printers, but paper-

makers, book-binders and perhaps type-founders. Surely, they never dreamed that the issues of their press would in time be esteemed as among the rarest and most valuable of American publications.

The great majority of Ephrata books, we are well aware, were in prose, and among these were some that were of peculiar interest. The "Martyr Book" was by far the largest American publication during the colonial period. On this occasion we shall speak only of poetic compositions, because from these we may derive the best conception of the thought and feeling of the authors. We shall, however, not limit ourselves to books printed in Ephrata, but may have something to say concerning work that was executed elsewhere by order of the brethren, or which may at least be regarded as expressive of their spirit. Even as it is, the field is so extensive that we may not be able to mention all of these peculiar works. I once asked the late Dr. Seidensticker: "Why did the Ephrata brethren publish so many different hymn-books?" "My dear boy," he replied, "don't you think they wanted to sing?"

That the Brethren possessed remarkable rhythmical and musical talents is not to be doubted. It seems as if they must have been able to compose poetry as readily as other people can write prose. The substance of their compositions is, of course, mystical in the highest degree—they fairly revel in the imagery of the Song of Solomon. They are fond of personifying divine attributes and of according them supreme honor. Thus, for instance, there are hymns addressed to Sophia, or Sophie, a personification of the Wisdom of the

Book of Proverbs, who is represented as a personage of extraordinary grace and beauty, with whom the poet is violently enamored. It seems curious to read:

“Fairest Sophie, may the longings
That within my bosom rise,
May a heart that loves thee dearly,
Win me favor in thine eyes.”

Indeed, many of these devout compositions are so “realistic” that in these days it might require some boldness to translate them.

As might be expected, the Ephrata hymns are full of anticipation of the speedy coming of the Lord. The following rough translation of the opening verses of one of the best may give an idea of their general character:

“Awakened by the midnight cry,
The virgins know the morn is nigh,
For now the watchman’s call they hear
That will not cease till day appear.
No more shall slumber close their eyes,
The bridegroom comes! The sun will
rise.

The splendor of their garments bright
Scatters the darkest shades of night;
The lamps now burning in their hand
Send forth their light to every land;
That men may see, with one accord,
How ransomed saints await the Lord.”

As will be observed, the Ephrata Hymns are not of the highest order. A student of hymnology would notice that they are mostly composed in the style of Angelus Silesius, a mystical German poet of the seventeenth century. There are said to be about seven hundred and fifty of them, of which about two-thirds were written by Conrad Beissel. The others were composed by Peter Miller, Christina Hoehn, and others of the brothers and sisters.

At first the Ephrata hymns were circulated in manuscript, and many entire volumes were written. Music books were also prepared in the same way, and these are still greatly ad-

mired. It must, however, soon have become evident that the wants of the Brotherhood could not thus be permanently supplied, and the leaders therefore began to look about for a publisher. This must have been a matter of profound consideration, for in those days no German press had been established in America.

The Ephrata publications are not all Ephrata imprints in the modern sense of the word. Not to include those issued by private parties after the brotherhood had ceased its labors, they may be regarded as consisting of three classes. The first of these includes three hymn-books printed in Roman characters by Benjamin Franklin. The titles of these books were long, and at times rhyming or alliterative, so that we can only give enough of the title to secure the recognition of the book. The oldest is dated 1730, and is entitled "Goetliche Liebes und Lobes Gethoene," or, in English, "Divine Melodies of Love and Praise." This may have been a kind of trial performance, mainly intended to show that the work could be done. Two years later, in 1732, appeared the "Vorspiel der Neuen Welt," that is, "Overture of the New World," a book of considerable size which was a real credit to its publisher. Finally, in 1736, was printed "Jacob's Kampf und Ritterplatz," that is, "Jacob's Scene of Conflict and Knighthood," which may perhaps be regarded as a kind of appendix to the preceding publications. A copy of the "Vorspiel," once the property of Conrad Weiser, contains about three hundred pages of manuscript hymns, bound up in the same volume.

The most remarkable thing about these books is the fact that Franklin should have undertaken their publication. We have an account of a

visit of "the long-bearded men" to the Philadelphia printer; but the fact that he became their publisher is not the least proof of his courage. He had no knowledge of the German language, and no sympathy for the religious views of his employers; but these facts merely urged him to unusual efforts. German compositors might be secured; but there was not a single font of German type in America, so the book had to be printed in the ordinary type of the English press, remedying occasional imperfections by the skillful use of the pen. It is truly wonderful that the work should have been done so well, and its successful accomplishment was really a greater credit to Franklin than many events in his life which have been more generally praised.

However greatly the "Brethren" may have admired Franklin's typography, I do not think they were fully satisfied with his book. No German likes to see his native language printed in the characters of a foreign tongue. Hence, when it became known that Christopher Sower of Germantown had imported a press and a font of type, they did not hesitate to make arrangements for the publication of another hymn-book.

This volume, which was printed in 1739, was entitled "Zionitischer Weyrauch's Huegel oder Myrrhen Berg," that is, "Zion's Hill of Incense or Mountain of Myrrh." As the first issue from Saur's press, and the earliest book printed in America with German types, it has a certain interest apart from its contents. The latter are, however, as curious as any others of the series. It is a well printed 12mo. of 792 pages, not including the preface and index, and contains 654 hymns, besides an appendix, entitled "The Rod of Aaron,"

with 37 hymns. It is divided into 33 sections, of which a few are entitled as follows: 1. "Aurora or Beginning of the Light of God." 2. "The Clearness of the Light." 3. "The Gates of the Abyss Opened." 4. "Foretaste of Paradise." 5. "The Holy Sabbath and its Profound Peace." 6. "Love and Spiritual Stillness." 7. "The Virgin's Betrothal in the New Covenant, confirmed by the Water of Baptism." 8. "The Excellence of Celibacy, and what it means to become one with Christ in Spirit." In this way the sections run to the end of the volume. The book is dedicated to "all the solitary turtle doves that coo in the wilderness;" and the turtle-doves of Ephrata certainly kept up a billing and cooing that made the forests ring.

Unfortunately, the intimate relations of Beissel and Saur were not of long duration. The story of their disagreement has often been told, and we have room for only a few particulars which now appear almost comical. In one of Beissel's hymns appeared a stanza which ran something like this:

"Behold, behold the man!
Behold him, if you can!
He is exalted by God's word;
And he, indeed, is Christ the Lord."

At the suggestion of the compositor Saur wrote to the author, inquiring whether he regarded himself as the Christ whom the people were to behold. In his reply Beissel did not directly answer the question, but intimated very plainly that Saur was a fool. This language did not please Saur, who published a pamphlet in which he said among other things that the name of Conrad Beissel contained the mystical numbers 666, representing the beast mentioned in the Apocalypse—hinting that Beissel was

himself the great enemy of mankind. This controversy was subsequently smoothed over; but it was one of the reasons why the brotherhood at Ephrata secured a press of its own and soon afterwards began the work of publication.

The "Weyrauch's Huegel" is really the only book of this series which properly may be placed in the second class, as it was published by direction of the brotherhood. Saur, however, published a number of hymn-books which were appreciated by various sects. Among these the most important was "Der Ausbund" (The Paragon), printed in 1742. It was originally a Mennonite collection of verses composed in Europe in the days of persecution. These poems were roughly constructed, as might have been expected, but they told their tale of suffering with a degree of simple fervor that could not fail to awaken responsive sympathy. To every hymn the name of some popular tune is added, which produces an effect that is somewhat incongruous. Thus one of the most solemn hymns is said to be sung to the tune of "There went a maiden with a jug." It has been suggested that secular tunes were employed to mislead enemies who might chance to hear the worshippers at their devotions. There is little condemnation of persecutors, but occasionally we find a burst of righteous indignation. Thus, in the "Martyr's Song" of George Lademacher and Wilhelm von Kepsel, we find the following:

"Cologne, Cologne, upon the Rhine,
When wilt thou heed our praying?
When wilt thou cease to drink the
blood
Of saints which thou art slaying?"

"Now from thy wicked raging cease,
And from thine evil turn thee!
Or hell at length will be thy grave,
Eternal fire will burn thee."

The "Ausbund" contains many things which one would hardly expect to find, such as stories from the Apocrypha and legends of the saints. In an appendix there is a series of sketches of martyrs, who from their names appear to have been related to many of the first settlers of Lancaster County. The book was first published at Schaffhausen in 1583, and has been printed in Basel as recently as 1838. There have been at least a dozen American editions, and even now it is said to be not entirely out of print.

Another of Saur's mystical publications was "Das Kleine Davidische Psalterspiel" ("The Little Psalter of David"), 1744, 530 pages. This book was derived from the "Inspirationists," who were, I suppose, generally absorbed by the new church of the "Brethren." Like all the other books of its class, it is in style as sweet as honey, and might almost be said to be "perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the powders of the merchant." It is in its way an excellent collection, containing real beauties. An edition was printed in Ephrata, in 1795, by Solomon Mayer. My own copy was printed by Michael Billmyer, of Germantown, in 1813. Other collections of the same general type we have no room to consider.

The third class of Ephrata publications includes those which actually bear the imprint of the brotherhood. The order had now settled down to practical life, and most of its literary works were in prose. The "turtle-doves," however, still continue to send forth musical notes. In 1747 appeared "Das Gesang der Einsamen und Verlassenen Turtel-Taube" ("The Song of the Solitary and Forsaken Turtle-Dove"). Then, in 1755, we have a Neues Vermehrtes Gesang der

einsman Turtel-Taube" ("Echo of the Solitary Turtle-dove"), and in 1762 there is a Neues Vermehrtes Gesang der Einsamen Turtel-taube" ("Improved Edition of the Solitary Turtle-dove"). In 1756 we have two small quarto volumes, "Das Bruderlied" ("The Brothers' Song") and "Ein angenehmer Geruch der Rosen und Lilien im Thale der Demuth" ("A Pleasant Odor of Roses and Lilies in the Valley of Humility"). The first of these is dated at "Bethania," the brothers' house, and the second is said to have been composed in Saron, the dwelling of the sisters.

At last, in 1776, appeared the "Paradiesisches Wunderspiel" (Wonderful Melody of Paradise), which may be regarded as the crown and glory of Ephrata hymnology. It is a handsome quarto of 472 pp., which is especially interesting as containing a brief autobiography of Conrad Beissel. To examine the book more minutely would no doubt be interesting to "those who like that sort of thing;" but we have no room to enter into particulars. The copy which I have the pleasure of exhibiting to the society was once the property of John Peter Miller, who was the editor of the volume.

We have traveled far since the days of the monks of Ephrata, and it is difficult for the present generation to appreciate their talents and their labors. Their mystical order was long since disbanded; their curious buildings will soon disappear; and even the names of most of these devout pioneers are now forgotten. It is only in their literature that they may be said to live; and it is from their publications alone that we may gain a consistent view of their peculiar genius. Even the morbid and eccentric forms in which their devotion was some-

times manifested are not destitute of interest to those who beneath them all can discern the workings of a common Christian life. The Order of the Solitary was not composed of great poets or artists; but for its faithfulness to the feeble gleams of light which it beheld, it deserves to be held in everlasting remembrance.

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