GRESHAM COLLEGE

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1928 – Annus Mirabilis of the Christmas Carol

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In 1877, Edward White Benson was consecrated first Bishop of the newly formed diocese of Truro (formerly the Archdeaconry of Cornwall). In 1880 Bishop Benson instituted a Christmas Eve service of *Nine Lessons with Carols*. Benson designed the format of the service, and he referenced medieval custom when he chose nine readings to give a narrative structure to the service. It was also Benson's idea to have the lessons read in rank order from chorister to bishop. Benson's carol service mopped people up from the pubs at closing time on 24 December and lured them into the temporary 400-seater wooden structure of Truro Cathedral. The service flourished, even when Bishop Benson left Truro to become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1883.

In 1918, the Dean of King's College, Cambridge, Eric Milner-White, adopted the Truro carol service, but changed the preposition to give *Nine Lessons* and *Carols*. That first King's carol service was a memorial for those fallen in the Great War (King's College alone had lost 199 students, former choristers, and fellows). A year later, in 1919, the nine single-sentence Benedictions that had been inherited from the Truro template and that had preceded each of the nine lessons were excised, to be replaced by a short outline of the contents of each lesson. The opening passage of St John's Gospel ('In the beginning was the Word…') became the final lesson (rather than the sixth as in 1918, or the seventh as in Truro). 'God rest you Merry, Gentlemen' was introduced, and 'While Shepherds watched', 'O Come, all ye Faithful', and 'Hark! the herald Angels sing' remained. 'The First Nowell' and Charles Wood's metrical version of the Magnificat were cut, and the service retained almost none of its Evensong- based roots. The Invitatory Carol 'Up! Good Christian Folk, and listen', which in 1918 had resembled an arresting Evensong introit, was sung after the Bidding Prayer so that the service now began with 'Once in royal David's city'. At this stage, the first verse of 'Once in royal' was sung by all of the choristers; the cosmos-stopping Treble solo was an innovation of the 1930s.

At 4.45 pm on 24 December 1927, as cassocks and surplices were removed at the end of the tenth *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols,* the history of the carol was to change irrevocably. But before it did, one of the most touchingly irreverent incidents in the history of carolling had come home to roost that very day. On Christmas Eve of 1927, *The Daily Telegraph* published a carol by the melancholic and iconoclastic composer Peter Warlock (1894 - 1930) to words by the journalist and poet Bruce Blunt (1899 - 1957). Blunt provided poetic inspiration for three of Warlock's finest songs, as well as for two carols, both dating from 1927. Blunt is barely remembered now, while Warlock is reckoned to be one of the early- 20th century's finest English composers. Warlock's real name was Philip Heseltine (the name that he used as a scholar and critic), but all of his musical compositions were published under the pseudonym of Peter Warlock. The view of Warlock's work as a composer is coloured by two aspects of his biography: his interest in the occult; and his apparent suicide on 17 December 1930 at the age of 36.

Warlock and Blunt enjoyed each other's company, and in particular they enjoyed drinking together. Indeed the pair had been arrested in Cadogan Street in London's Chelsea district in February 1927 for being drunk and disorderly. Warlock was clearly proud of this event since he pasted the newspaper report of the arrest into his diary. Warlock and Blunt may have enjoyed their riotous lifestyle, but the pair were living beyond their means. They had already collaborated on a carol ('The First Mercy') which was to be published at the end of the year by the monthly literary journal *The London Mercury*, and now they hit upon the idea that they could make this type of work pay. Blunt lived in rural Hampshire and remembered their second carol's creation as follows:

> In December 1927, we were both extremely hard up, and, in the hope of being able to get suitably

drunk at Christmas, conceived the idea of collaborating on another carol which should be published in a daily paper. So, walking on a moonlit night between the "Plough" at Bishop's Sutton and the "Anchor" at Ropley, I thought of the words of "Bethlehem Down". I sent them off to Philip in London, the carol was completed in a few days and published (words and music) in *The Daily Telegraph* on Christmas Eve. We had an immortal carouse on the proceeds and decided to call ourselves "Carols Consolidated".

However brattishly conceived, and however imperfectly remembered by Blunt over fifteen years later, the carol is deeply moving because of the perfect the marriage of its words and their musical setting. In fact, Warlock wrote the music for 'Bethlehem Down' in November 1927, not December. And three years after its composition, Warlock arranged 'Bethlehem Down' for solo voice and organ. Two and a half weeks later Warlock was dead.

1928 was the most important year for the carol in the 20th century. Oxford University Press published the *Oxford Book of Carols*, and at Cambridge University the Choir of King's College broadcast its *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* on BBC Radio for the first time. In spite of its official title of *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, the *Radio Times* billing for Monday 24 December 1928 advertised a *Christmas Eve Carol Service from King's College, Cambridge*. At 3.30 pm, 2LO London (launching its signal from equipment atop Selfridge's department store in Oxford Street – one of twenty local transmitters) and 5XX Daventry (on Borough Hill in Northamptonshire in the heart of England) radiated the sound of King's College Choir on 361.4 metres (Medium Wave) and 1,562.5 metres (Long Wave) respectively. In an inviting coincidence, later that same evening the author E. F. Benson read his pre-war ghost story *The Confession of Charles Linkworth* on the radio. Edward Frederic Benson (1867 - 1940) was the third son of the late Edward White Benson who, as Bishop of Truro, had devised the original *Nine Lessons with Carols* service.

The 1928 service proceeded, and was broadcast by the young BBC, as follows:

Once in royal David's city (congregation join for verses 5 & 6)
Bidding Prayer & Lord's Prayer
O little town of Bethlehem – Walford Davies *First Lesson – Genesis 3, verses 8-15 (Chorister)* In the bleak midwinter – Thomas Strong
Second Lesson – Genesis 22, verses 15-18 (Undergraduate)
I saw three ships – traditional
Third Lesson – Isaiah 9, verses 2 & 6-7 (Choral Scholar)
God rest you merry, gentlemen – traditional (choir verses 2 & 4)
Fourth Lesson – Micah 5, verses 2-4 (Bachelor of Arts)
Lullay my liking – Gustav Holst
The holly and the ivy – arranged by Walford Davies *Fifth Lesson – Luke 1, 26-33 & 38 (Fellow)* Shepherds, in the field abiding – Old Carol of Lorraine
Sixth Lesson – Matthew 1, verses 18-23 (Free Church Minister)
While shepherds watched – Este's Psalter 1592
Seventh Lesson – Luke 11, verses 8-16 (Mayor's Chaplain)
I heard an infant weeping – 17th-century German Little Jesus, sweetly sleep – Old Czech
Eighth Lesson – Matthew 11, verses 1-11 (Eton College representative)
In dulci jubilo – 14th-century German
Ninth Lesson – John 1, verses 1-14 (Provost) **O come, all ye faithful – 18th century** *Christmas Day Collect & Blessing*
Hark! the herald Angels sing – Mendelssohn
Bold type shows hymns for the congregation, 'in which they are asked to join heartily'

Strikingly, three of the congregational carols ('Once in royal', the first, and 'O come, all ye faithful' and 'Hark! the herald', the final two) don't appear in the *Oxford Book of Carols* at all. 'O little town', the third congregational

carol, appears in *OBC* to a different tune (the one we use most regularly now, harmonised by Vaughan Williams) as does 'While shepherds watched' (which appears in *OBC* to the so-called 'London tune' in the major, which is only rarely used today). The only congregational carol in the 1928 King's Carol Service that appears in the same version in *OBC* is 'God rest you, merry', whose second tune corresponds to that used at King's in 1928.

Of the choir carols in the 1928 service, 'Shepherds in the field abiding' and 'I heard an infant weeping' do not appear in the *Oxford Book of Carols*. 'In the bleak midwinter' appears in *OBC* to Gustav Holst's 1904 tune, whereas at King's the tune was that composed by Thomas Strong, Bishop of Oxford at the time. 'The holly and the ivy' and 'I saw three ships' appear in *OBC* in arrangements by Martin Shaw, whereas at King's the arrangements were by Walford Davies (uncredited in the case of the latter). 'In dulci jubilo' was sung at King's in the (uncredited) arrangement by Robert Pearsall, whereas in *OBC* the arrangements are by Bartholomew Gesius (1601) and J. S. Bach. The overlap of choir carols between King's and *OBC* were Gustav Holst's tender 'Lullay my liking' (published for the first time, nine years earlier, in 1919) and 'Little Jesus, sweetly sleep' (brand new on the British scene and appearing first in *OBC*). Alfred Mann, Organist at King's College, and his *de facto* assistant Boris Ord, clearly knew of the *Oxford Book of Carols*. But already, ten years after its first appearance at King's, the carol service had created its own traditions. That a newly published carol such as 'Rocking' (as 'Little Jesus, sweetly sleep' is titled in *OBC*) was sung at the 1928 King's carol service shows what a beguiling little gem this Czech carol is.

Percy Dearmer, Martin Shaw, and Ralph Vaughan Williams published the hymnal *Songs of Praise* in 1925 (the working title had been *Songs of the Spirit*). This collection of hymns was designed to be 'national in character' and was especially successful in schools. By 1929 the need for an enlarged edition was identified. After some focused market research, in which 'eighty-nine parsons discussed the various hymns in common use, votes being registered and tabulated', the hymnal grew by half as much again. So by the late 1920s, the Dearmer/Shaw/Williams trio of Anglophile reformers was properly in its stride. And in 1928 they published one of the most significant carol publications of all time: the *Oxford Book of Carols*. This is a substantial collection of just under two hundred carols, and almost every carol is accompanied by a short, informative commentary. Carol singing was in the air.

The Preface of the *Oxford Book of Carols* is delightfully authoritative and opinionated in equal measure. It was written by Rev. Percy Dearmer (1867 - 1936), a socialist, High-Church Anglican liturgist who believed that music should be at the core of Christian worship. And Dearmer was the author of *The Parson's Handbook*, published in the concluding months of the nineteenth century. In the *Handbook*, Dearmer outlined his ideals of Anglican ritual, which he believed should be along English pre-Reformation lines rather than Italianate. Dearmer's writing style is dated, as one would expect from a churchman writing in 1899, but the directness of Dearmer's mode of expression is persuasive:

> The parson should beg his people to discourage small boys from begging in Advent under the pretext of singing carols—if it can be called singing. It is really a sin to give pence to children for degrading themselves and dishonouring sacred things. Perhaps the best remedy is for members of the congregation or the choir themselves to sing carols in the streets

In 1901, Percy Dearmer became Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Primrose Hill. Three years later, the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams was minding his own business:

> I was sitting in my study in Barton Street, Westminster, when a cab drove up to the door and 'Mr Dearmer' was announced. I just knew his name vaguely as a parson who invited tramps to sleep in his drawing-room; but he had not come to me about tramps. He went straight to the point and asked me to edit the music of a hymn book.

Vaughan Williams didn't agree to Dearmer's request immediately. But when Vaughan Williams did eventually agree to act as musical editor of the *English Hymnal*, he did so with opinionated fervor. Dearmer and Vaughan Williams were rigorous in their dislike of Victoriana. Of the new carol tunes published in Bramley & Stainer's late-Victorian *Christmas Carols, Old and New*, Dearmer thought that only one was acceptable – the melody to

'See amid the winter's snow' by John Goss. The *Oxford Book of Carols* pointedly deprived the Christmas carol of its Victorian accretions in order to reveal medieval, Baroque, and folk-based tunes in abundance, some of which have remained in the repertory (like the glorious Czech 'Rocking' carol) but many of which have not.

The *Oxford Book of Carols* contains 197 numbers, organised into five sections: Part I – Traditional Carols with their proper tunes;
Part II – Traditional Carol tunes set to other traditional texts; Part III – Traditional Carols with modern words;
Part IV – Traditional words to modern tunes;
Part V – Carols by modern writers and composers.
Then followed a seven-number Appendix – Additional folk tunes proper to material in Part I.

The last item in the *Oxford Book of Carols* (no. 197) is 'The Crown of Roses (Tchaikovsky's 'Legend')':

> When Jesus Christ was yet a child, He had a garden small and wild, Wherein he cherished roses fair, And wove them into garlands there.

This poignant carol had bought a round-the-world ticket. It began life as the poem 'Roses and Thorns', in a collection called *Songs of Summer*. 'Roses and Thorns' was published in Boston, Massachusetts in 1857 by the American Richard Henry Stoddard (1825 - 1903).
Stoddard later changed the title to 'Legend' and the verses were translated into Russian in 1877 by the radical poet Alekséy Pleshchéyev (1825 - 1893). Pleshchéyev's poem was set to music in 1883 by the celebrated Russian composer Piotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893) and was published as 'Legenda', the fifth of *Sixteen Songs for Children* in 1884. Tchaikovsky arranged the song for unaccompanied choir five years later, and two years after that it was given a choral performance at the opening of New York's Carnegie Hall in 1891, where 'Tchaikovsky was called out twice after it with great enthusiasm'. Subsequently it was translated by the young Geoffrey Dearmer (1893 - 1996) – Rev. Percy Dearmer's elder son – for inclusion in the *English Carol Book* of 1913. Even if the carol weren't touchingly beautiful, you'd want to anthologize it just for its staying power. And for the fact that after its intercontinental bilingual travels, the poem came back better in young Dearmer's translation than it had left in Stoddard's original English. To the left is Stoddard's original, to the right is Geoffrey Dearmer's youthfully impressive de-translation:

They took the thorns, and made a crown, on his shining head; the roses should have shone blood instead!	Then of the thorns they made a crown, And place it And with rough fingers pressed it down, And where Till on his forehead fair and young Were little drops of Red drops of blood like roses sprung.

Monograph
Timothy Day *I saw Eternity the Other Night – King's College, Cambridge, and an English Singing Style* (Allen Lane, 2018)
Web Site
Richard Jordan (ed.) *The Hymns and Carols of Christmas* http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com (constantly updated and enlarged)
Sheet Music
Hugh Keyte & Andrew Parrott (eds) *The Shorter New Oxford Book of Carols* (OUP, 1992)
Sound Recording
David Willcocks, Philip Ledger, Stephen Cleobury (conductors) with The Choir of King's College, Cambridge *100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols* 2 CDs (KGS 0033, 2018)
Video Recording
Stephen Cleobury and Boris Ord (conductors) with The Choir of King's College, Cambridge
Carols from King's 2 DVDs (Opus Arte, 2001) [the 2000 and 1954 services]