

What Child is This?

... *When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem..." Luke 2:15 (NKJV)*

Feelings of sadness come over me whenever I hear this deeply moving carol. It is, after all, set in the key of E minor, the "saddest of all keys." Yet triumphant joy dispels the sadness as we exclaim: "This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing."

The melancholic melody is a famous old British tune called "Greensleeves," originally a ballad about a man pining for his lost love, the fair Lady Greensleeves. Tradition says it was composed by King Henry VIII for Anne Boleyn. That's unlikely, but we do know that Henry's daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, danced to the tune.

Shakespeare referred to it twice in his play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In Act V, for example, Falstaff said, "Let the sky rain potatoes; let it thunder to the tune of 'Green Sleeves.'"

It was licensed to two different printers in 1580, and soon thereafter was being used with religious texts. Its first association with Christmas came in 1642, in a book titled *New Christmas Carols*, in which it was used with the poem "The Old Year Now Away Has Fled." The last verse says: *Come, give's more liquor when I doe call, / I'll drink to each one in this hall...And God send us a happy new yeare!*

For nearly 150 years, however, "Greensleeves" has been most identified with "What Child Is This?" The words of this carol are taken from a longer poem written by an insurance agent named William Chatterton Dix, born in Bristol, England, in 1837. His father was a surgeon who wanted his son to follow his footsteps. But having no interest in medicine, William left Bristol Grammar School, moved to Glasgow, and sold insurance.

His greatest love was his prose and poetry for Christ. He wrote two devotional books, a book for children, and scores of hymns, two of which remain popular Christmas carols: "What Child Is This?" and "As with Gladness Men of Old."

All of Dix's hymns should be more widely sung today, for they are masterpieces of poetry, filled with rich scriptural truth. Here's the way he begins his exultant hymn, "Alleluia!"

*Alleluia! Sing to Jesus! His the scepter, His the throne.
Alleluia! His the triumph, His the victory alone.*