

Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's Who in Christian History*.

## **WATTS, ISAAC** (1674–1748)

*English hymn writer*

Isaac Watts was the first Englishman to succeed in overcoming the prejudices that opposed the introduction of hymns into English public worship. Today it is difficult to realize that such a prejudice ever existed. The objection to singing usually was not an objection to the singing of the Psalms, but an objection to the singing of hymns that had been composed in modern time.

In 1707 Watts published a book of hymns, some of which were of such enduring worth that scarcely any hymnal in modern times omits them: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Joy to the World,” “O God Our Help in Ages Past,” “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun,” “Lord of the Worlds Above,” and “Give Me the Wings of Faith to Rise.” They were by no means the first English hymns, but they were the first considerable collection. It is not surprising that Independent Congregations sang no other songs for seventy years or so, or that Watts’s hymns have retained their popularity after generations of hymn writers.

As a result of Watts’s writings, the need of the human heart to express its religious feelings found vent in a new and more expressive direction. The lyric impulse that again and again had manifested itself in sacred hymns, despite the shackles of the Calvinistic devotion to the Psalms, found its expression first in these freer and more spontaneous versions by Watts. These new versions of the Psalms had a freedom and spiritual fervency unknown before. This gives place to a more spontaneous and emotional expression of the general thought of the Psalms. The tunes to which these new hymns were to be sung were emotional, spontaneous, and popular. This “new wine” burst the old bottles of rigid psalmody and created a new church music of its own.

When Isaac Watts’s hymns began to find their way into favor, many conservative religious people disdainfully called them “Watts’s whims.” While Martin Luther’s hymns were being sung widely in Germany, Watts’s hymns were still fighting their way into some churches, sometimes as much as thirty to forty years later.

Watts wrote over five hundred hymns; however, not all were the best quality. He said that Charles Wesley’s hymn “Wrestling Jacob” was worth all that he (Watts) had ever written. Despite his modesty, his output was very significant to English hymnody.

In 1719, Watts introduced Psalm paraphrases written with greater freedom than those that had been in use. He managed to express faithfully the sentiment of the Psalms and enriched them for Christian people by references to New Testament thought.

Isaac Watts’s *Hymns and Psalms of David Imitates* was also well known in the United States colonies in the eighteenth century. He kept in touch with the colonies, carrying on regular correspondence with different religious leaders such as Cotton Mather. Benjamin Franklin published Watts’s *Psalms* in 1729. By 1740 it was clear that it strongly caught the interest of the American colonists. One of the earliest American books for children was *Divine and Moral Songs*, published by Isaac Watts in 1720.

See: Isaac Watts. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.

[Isaac Watts](#)