

James Montgomery

James Montgomery was born in Irvine, Ayrshire, on November 4th 1771, a son to John and Mary Montgomery. One source says he was one of 4 children; another source says he had 2 brothers.

His father was a Pastor in the Moravian Church, one of the oldest Protestant denominations, dating back to the 15th century. His parents attempted to set up a church of the Moravian Brethren in Irvine but met with little success. In 1776 the family moved to a Moravian settlement in County Antrim and shortly afterwards to Yorkshire,

The Moravian Church valued personal piety and global mission. James inherited a strong religious bent and a passion for mission.

In 1783, when James was 12, he was enrolled at the Fulneck Moravian School near Leeds to train for the Ministry. In the same year his parents left for Barbados to pursue missionary work. James never saw them again. They died within a year of each other when James was 19 and were buried in Barbados.

James had ambitious plans to become a poet but secular studies were banned at his school. However, he was determined and independent and found ways of borrowing and reading much poetry.

James failed to complete his schooling and on leaving he undertook 2 apprenticeships – first with a baker in Mirfield then with a store-keeper in Wath – upon – Dearne. He did not enjoy these experiences but did describe Wath as “the queen of villages.” In return the community named a hall, a street and a square after him.

During his time in Mirfield and Wath John wrote much poetry including his earliest hymns. He travelled from Wath to London hoping to find a publisher but with no success. He then came to Sheffield where he was appointed clerk and book keeper to Joseph Gales, auctioneer, bookseller and editor of the Sheffield Register newspaper.

Joseph Gales used the Sheffield Register to promote radical reformist ideas, including the abolition of slavery, educational improvements and the removal of legal constraints on religious dissenters. In 1794 Gales fled to America to escape persecution and James took over editorship of the paper, relaunching it as the Sheffield Iris. He was rather less radical than Joseph Gales but he was imprisoned twice; once when he printed a song celebrating the fall of the Bastille and again when he criticised

a Magistrate for forcibly dispelling a political protest in Sheffield. During his first period in prison in York Castle he wrote the poem "The Wanderer of Switzerland". William Wordsworth rated it highly, saying in a letter to James "From the time I first read your "Wanderer of Switzerland" I have felt a lively interest in your destiny as a poet." The poem, based on the French conquest of Switzerland, brought great public attention and a commission to write a poem on the abolition of the slave trade – "The West Indies".

A number of new newspapers began to be established in Sheffield and James did not have the journalistic skills to match the growing competition. In 1825 he sold the Iris to local bookseller John Blackwell and concentrated on his poetry and hymn writing. Although his reputation as a poet gradually grew in Britain and beyond, James expected that his hymns would be his greatest legacy. He composed around 400 hymns and several volumes were published. Indeed, he became known as "The Christian Poet." William Howitt, a fellow poet and contemporary of Montgomery, wrote "Perhaps there are no lyrics in the language that are so truly Christian."

James spoke out against many issues through his poetry including the slave trade, the practice of using children in chimney sweeping, and gambling. He advocated for overseas missions, extending opportunities for education through new schools, a working men's library and Sunday Schools. He was a founder member of the Sunday School Union and wrote a number for hymns for its services. We are singing 3 of those this morning.

James died in his sleep at his home, The Mount on Glossop Road, on April 30th 1854. He was considered a local hero as well as a renowned poet. He was honoured with a public funeral and the cortege took over 4 hours to walk the route to the General Cemetery. Montgomery Road and The Montgomery Theatre are named after him and there is a statue to his honour in Sheffield Cathedral forecourt as well as a memorial window inside the Cathedral. His spirit lives on in the inspiring hymns which he wrote.

Judith Adam