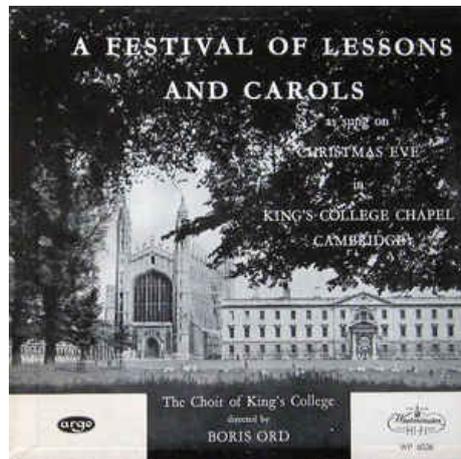


“A Festival of Lessons and Carols as Sung on Christmas Eve in King's College Chapel, Cambridge”--King's College Choir; Boris Ord, director (1954)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Timothy Day (guest post)*



Original album cover

In the early years of the 20th century, King's was a rather small constituent college of Cambridge University with about 180 undergraduates. It was famous though--as it had always been--for the beauty and magnificence of its chapel built in the 15th and 16th centuries. For a college chapel, the building is enormous, 288 feet in length and 90 feet in height, and when it's empty, the sounds are prolonged by about six seconds.

In 1918, a man called Eric Milner-White had been appointed Dean of the Chapel. He'd been an undergraduate at King's and, after ordination, had returned as Chaplain. He had volunteered immediately when war broke out in 1914 and he had served as an army chaplain on the Western Front. Of his own distinguished war service, Milner-White never spoke. It seems that he had led stretcher-bearers over the top again and again to bring back the wounded from No Man's Land.

On Milner-White's appointment as Dean, the College had asked him to set down his thoughts on the Chapel services. He knew the sorrow and anger and disillusion of the young men returning from the trenches. How could the liturgies of the Church of England mean anything to them? He wanted more "colour, warmth and delight" in the services, he said. He also reminded the Governing Body that this was not merely a College Chapel. The architecture, the musical resources and the unending stream of young men passing through the University gave King's "extraordinary potentialities for the whole religious life of England." Being a private chapel, and so "free from the ecclesiastical authority which governs even the most 'live' cathedrals," it could take a lead in liturgical reform and make experiments. Milner-White need not burden the members of the Governing Body with all the details he had in mind. Perhaps they would allow him to use his discretion. And they did, and before the year was out, he had devised a carol service for Christmas Eve.

This would be outside the normal term, of course, so there would be very few students about. But this was part of his wider plan. The carol service would be primarily a gift to the City of

Cambridge. He took as his model the service that had been devised by the first Bishop of Truro, E.W. Benson. It had first been celebrated on Christmas Eve in 1880 in the wooden shed that was used while the Cathedral at Truro was being built. The service consisted of a sequence of nine lessons--as was the custom at the greatest feasts in the Middle Ages--which were read by officers of the church from the most junior, a chorister, to the most senior, the Bishop at Truro, at King's the Provost. Between the readings were sung carols by the choir and congregational hymns.

The service quickly became very popular in Cambridge and after it began to be broadcast by the BBC in 1928 and, from 1932, transmitted abroad via short-wave, it became famous. Soon the College's annual report was telling old members that their carol service was being heard over "the whole Empire and the United States."

During the Second World War, news reached Cambridge of secret listeners to the Christmas Eve service in Belgium, Holland and Czechoslovakia, and of services of lessons and carols arranged in German and Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. In a ten-minute film about the Blitz made by the Ministry of Information in London for American audiences--"today England stands unbeaten, unconquered, unafraid"--the commentator explained that on Christmas Eve, "England does what England has done for a thousand years, she worships the Prince of Peace" and the film cut to a King's treble singing "Come and behold him, born the King of Angels." The singing at King's had entered the consciousness of listeners everywhere as no other choir had ever done.

It was not just that the singing was very good. There had never been singing quite like this. It was not only the astonishing acoustic of the Chapel. In 1881, the Governing Body had agreed to establish a choral scholarship for an undergraduate entering the College. Very gradually since then the lay clerks, who sang with the 16 boy choristers, had been replaced by undergraduates. The last of the lay clerks had died, in office, in 1928, just before the first broadcast. So, now, instead of men in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s, and maybe some in their 70s--such as you found in most cathedral and college choirs in England--at King's, the 14 singers in the back row were all aged between 18 and 22.

The timbre of the singing was unforced. Expressive gestures were intense but subdued. Tempos were almost invariably steady. The ensemble was extremely disciplined, with "t's" and "d's" synchronised with unerring precision. Vibrato was avoided. The tuning was immaculate. The sounds shone with an unearthly silvery glitter. This singing style was of a piece with particular strands emphasized in the education these singers were receiving. It was an education that encouraged team-spirit and strict discipline, and showmanship was distrusted. One of the outstanding rugby players in Cambridge in the 1930s—he was to become a clergyman and the most distinguished church historian of his day—explained that he liked to play hooker because there in the scrum "you can do your good anonymously, with no sense of display"; he did not wish to tear about on the field where people could watch him "doing noble things and all that."

Why did the service appeal to so many of faiths other than Anglican Christianity and of none? Perhaps because denominational ramparts were lowered at Christmastime. Perhaps because of the sense of vulnerability conveyed by the singing of children, or because you were suddenly asked to remember "the poor and the helpless, the cold, the hungry and the oppressed; the sick in body and in mind and them that mourn; the lonely and the unloved; the aged and the little children." Perhaps because the singing was so extraordinarily beautiful.

The long-playing disc invented in mid-century allowed this famous singing style to be listened to and studied even more closely. It is not hard to understand why the first LP King's made should be of the Christmas Eve service, or at least--because of the technological limitations--of an abbreviated version of it with only seven lessons. The first lesson is read by a chorister and the last lesson, here the seventh, by the Provost as it had been since 1918. The other lessons are usually read by other members of the college--a choral scholar, a fellow, the director of music for example--and men from Cambridge such as a representative of the churches in the city and the mayor's chaplain. Here, though, the sixth is read by the Vice-Chancellor of the University and all the others by Donald Beves, a fellow at King's in modern languages for more than 30 years. Perhaps the most startling departure from strict observance of the tradition is the organ accompaniment that is provided throughout "Once in royal David's city."

As early as 1933, after an international conference of musicologists at the University, the Cambridge professor of music was sure that the singing of King's heard by the conference delegates would have "a wonderful reverberation" both in North America and on the Continent. For had not English choirs like King's been singing a work like Handel's "Messiah" with no break in the tradition ever since it was composed? More and more Festivals of Nine Lessons and Carols began to be celebrated all the over the globe and the singing style became enormously influential not just as a model for church choirs but as a style for many singers in the so-called early music movement.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.