

Fall 2015

## The Visions that Created the Hymn "Be Thou My Vision"

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### Recommended Citation

Ayres, Brenda, "The Visions that Created the Hymn "Be Thou My Vision"" (2015). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 57.

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## The Visions that Created the Hymn “Be Thou My Vision”<sup>1</sup>

Brenda Ayres

Congratulations to the graduates today. You probably have little idea of how much you have accomplished, achieved, and learned in order to earn your high school degree. Your bios and video presentations give testimony to your faithfulness in developing your talents and using them in service to the Lord. Yes, you are to be highly commended. We are here to honor you this day.

Your graduation, however, is not the end of your journey. You probably see yourself as standing at a crossroad, wondering what turn to make. As you peer down that road, you wonder where it will take you. At this time in your lives, you may not clearly see what to do and what God wants you to do. You may not be sure if you are to go to college and if so, which one. Or you may have already enrolled, but you have no idea as to your major. Or you may have already declared a major, but even though you don't realize it now, after you take a few classes in subjects that you never studied before, like astrophysics or Chinese history, you might settle on a different vocation. And/or you may be needing a job and are asking about that. Then there are the matters of your heart: You may want to get married, but you are not sure if “he's the one” and if this is God's timing for you to marry.

Your slide show documents from whence you have come, but there is no slide show that we can watch that will lay out the specifics of God's plan for you from this point on.

But God does have a slide show about you. His vision is true and good.

We all know the hymn “Be Thou My Vision,” but we don't often think about the words that we sing. Helen Keller once said: “The only one thing worse than being blind is having sight

but no vision.”<sup>2</sup> If you want to see the path that God has for you, then you must be able to say to God today, “Be thou my vision.”

“Be Thou My Vision” is an Irish song that has been around since the sixth century. One of the earliest known Christian hymns, its original title was *Bi Thusa ‘mo Shúile*<sup>3</sup> and its words were written in Gaelic by Dallán Forgaill.<sup>4</sup> Dallán was an Irish poet and Latin scholar, and considered the “King of the Poets.”<sup>5</sup> His proper name was Eochaid (or “Son of Colla”),<sup>6</sup> but when a young boy, he became blind from studying too much when they didn’t have things like glasses or contacts or laser surgery. He was given the name of Dallán which means “little blind one.”<sup>7</sup> This is why he wrote the song: Because he was unable to see on his own, he asked God to be His vision.

You are in the exact same place as he was, unable to see what is ahead of you. It is the best place to be because, if you are wise young women, you will give Jesus your hand and ask Him to lead you.

“Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart; / Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art” is the first sentence of Dallán’s song, and it has two different focuses. Both are necessary in order to walk in God’s light. Firstly, content echoes Proverbs 3:5-6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do, and He will show you which path to take” (NLT). You should not trust your own vision but trust God’s vision instead. Set aside your own understanding of what you should do with your life and let God lead you. Trust in *His* vision. Secondly, we sing, “Naught be all else to me” so often, but do we understand what these words mean? “Naught” is an archaic word, and the syntax or word order is extremely strange to us. In modern language, it too has a dual meaning. We would say that “Nothing else should matter to me except You,” and “There is nothing that I would give all

of myself to except You.” So the first sentence affirms that you want to have His vision, but you are also saying that you want Him to be your vision, that you hold nothing more important and sacred than the vision that you have of Him. Peter Marshall once led the United States Senate in this prayer: “Give us clear vision that we may know where to stand and what to stand for, because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything.”<sup>8</sup> What will be your prayer? What will be your vision? What will you graduates stand for? You graduates will take one path or another after your home schooling. What will be the source of the vision that will guide your way?

If it is your heart’s cry that you want *His* vision and that you want *Him* to be your vision, then He will direct your path.

Dallán, the originator of “Be Thou My Vision,” was called Dallán Eigeas. What a paradox: His name meant “the blind one and the learned one.”<sup>9</sup> That’s what a Christian is: the blind one that sees through Jesus. This is the prophesy that was fulfilled in Christ that “On that day the deaf will hear words of a book, And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see” (NAS). Do you want more knowledge—both academic and spiritual? Let Jesus be your vision.

Later the Roman Catholic Church canonized Dallán so that he became Saint Dallán. The story goes that while he was working in a monastery translating Scripture, some pirates barged in and cut off his head. Reportedly God reattached his head to his body after he was martyred, and according to the Church, that was an authenticated miracle.<sup>10</sup>

Although it is highly unlikely that any pirate will behead you, you do not know what God has in store for you. Dallán, like David in the Bible, was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14), and if God wanted to restore his head, He did it. He will perform miracles in your life if

you let Him. And as with Dallán and David, no doubt there will be times in your life that it will be very difficult for you to see and understand why you go through trials. When you suffer, the thing to do is to “turn your eyes upon Jesus,” as another song says. “Look full into His wonderful face, / And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, / In the light of His glory and grace.”<sup>11</sup>

A couple of centuries after St. Dallán looked to God for His vision, another saint put Dallán’s poem to music, to an Irish folklore song called “Slane,” named for Slane Hill. You are familiar with St. Patrick about whom we celebrate on March 17 of each year. Patrick defied a royal edict by High King Logaire of Tara. The king ordained that no one was allowed to kindle a fire until he lit his own to signal the commencement of the pagan spring festival. In defiance of pagan worship, on Slane Hill St. Patrick lit the Paschal candle, also known as the Christ candle, to signify the beginning of Easter. The king was so impressed by his conviction and evangelistic zeal, he pardoned him and then supported his missionary work in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> Patrick would convert over 100,000 people in 30 years<sup>13</sup> and establish over 700 churches.<sup>14</sup> Again, here was a man whose vision was God and only God, and it was God whom he recognized as the true king; as the lines of the song say, “Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, / Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.” Will you have the courage to obey God, no matter what He calls you to do?

In 1905 Mary Elizabeth Byrne translated the Old Irish song into English.<sup>15</sup> Byrne was a linguist who graduated from the National University of Ireland.<sup>16</sup> Although several biographies state that she graduated in 1905, women were not allowed entrance until 1908. She received the Chancellor’s Gold Medal at the Royal University of Ireland,<sup>17</sup> which was the first university in Ireland to confer degrees on women. The recognition, bestowed on her in 1902, was for having written outstanding English prose. She earned her M.A. in Modern Literature at St. Mary’s University College in Dublin in 1910<sup>18</sup> when very few women were earning Bachelor’s degrees

much less Master's. She devoted her life to higher education in Ireland and wrote several dictionaries on the Irish language. At a time when very few Irish women had any thought of getting an education, she had God's vision. Imagine some of the battles that she had to fight in order to reach her goals because she was a woman who wanted an education on par with men. No wonder she would write: "Be Thou my battle Shield, Sword for the fight; / Be Thou my Dignity, Thou my Delight; / Thou my soul's Shelter, Thou my high Tower." Her academic success was not her only call to fame. She married a lay Methodist minister and metalsmith, Samuel Cooke," and in 1908 gave birth to Alfred Cooke. When he was about your age and had a clear vision of what he felt called to do, he changed his first name to Alistair.<sup>19</sup> We older folks recall him as the host of PBS Masterpiece Theatre from 1971-1992. He also wrote and produced *Letter from America* and *Alistair Cooke's America*.

Byrne translated one line as claiming, "Thou mine Inheritance." Besides having the courage to travel a lonely path with just her and the Lord, as she brazenly sought education and publication for herself as a female and then pursued a career, which was very unusual for a woman, she also became a mother who could say, "Yes, God is my inheritance, and He gave me several legacies including a child who would become one of the most brilliant journalists in British and American history." After giving birth, though, she continued her education until she graduated two years later.

To you graduates, you have heard it said that too many women want it all, so they end up not doing as well as they would like with their careers and with raising children at the same time because they are spread too thin. But Byrne knew that in Christ Jesus, "[we] can do all things through Him who strengthens [us]" (Phil. 4:13). "O Power of my power," Byrne wrote: We get power from God's power to do His will.

Think about what this woman was able to do with her life when the world was not hospitable to women or to the Irish. Jonathan Swift, who was Anglo-Irish, once wrote, “Vision is the art of seeing the invisible.”<sup>20</sup> What will God let you see that is invisible to others? A new song? A cure for Alzheimer’s? A teacher that will impact the lives of thousands of people? A mother to a child that will contribute something wonderful to humanity?

In 1912 Eleanor H. Hull set Byrne’s translation into rhyming verse.<sup>21</sup> Hull also was an ambitious and courageous woman who had God’s vision instead of man’s vision for herself. In the late nineteenth century, she attended Alexandra College in Dublin.<sup>22</sup> In 1899 she founded the Irish Texts Society to preserve early manuscripts in Old Irish,<sup>23</sup> when the Old Irish ways and language were extremely controversial because most of Ireland’s counties were agitating for independence from England. She was also the president of the Irish Literary Society of London. She wrote several books on Irish literature, history, culture, and folklore<sup>24</sup> and therefore was an early pioneer in validating the Irish after centuries of discrimination against them by both the British and later the Americans.

Katherine Logan said, “Vision is of God. A vision comes in advance of any task well done.”<sup>25</sup> So here is another woman (Hull) at the turn of the century who was a visionary, not only to infiltrate a world that privileged men, but to prove with everything she set her hand to, that she would do it with God’s vision, and the result would be that God would lift her “heavenward,” as her song promises, and there she would get insight of doing extremely progressive things in her field.

With Hull’s words put to the music tune of “Slane,” David Evans included “Be Thou My Vision” in the second edition of the Church of Scotland’s *Church Hymnary* in 1927.<sup>26</sup> Evans was a prominent composer in Wales who was head of the Department of Music at University College

Cardiff, now known as Cardiff University. He was committed to preserving and honoring Welsh culture and language. He supported, composed music, directed, and performed in the Cymanfa Ganu each year, which is a Welsh festival of sacred hymns. He also supported the Eisteddfod festival that hold literary competitions in the Welsh language. For the bicentenary celebration of Methodism in Wales, he composed a short cantata titled *Gloria*. And he composed a number of other words as well but is best remembered for his knowledge of religious music and its preservation as he helped edit the *Revised Church Hymnary* and edited *Llyfr Emynau a Thonau* (the Welsh Methodist and Wesleyan hymns), *The Children's Hymnbook*, and other collections of Welsh music, preserving it for posterity.<sup>27</sup>

Vision is inherently grounded in the past but reaches for the future like a flower. For you, it is like standing on the ocean shore and peering into the horizon. All of the people who were involved in rendering “Be Thou My Vision” folded together their love for God, their love for their native languages and culture and folklore, and their vision of what the song meant to them with the hope of what it might mean speak to others. The Holy Spirit of course directed the entire process for the purpose of encouraging all who would hear, that no matter what, we are to keep God as our vision.

If you graduates keep God as your vision, He will raise you “heavenward.” There is a sore temptation right now to get caught up in the materialism of the day. Our song wants us to be resolute when we sing, “Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise.” Jesus tells us to “store [our] treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:20). As your parents and other older people can tell you, it is foolish to aspire to the American dream of two cars in the garage, a swimming pool out back, and a five-bedroom house. Even if you owned all of this and ten times more, it will never satisfy the soul. Besides,

you cannot hold onto material goods; it is so easy in this world to lose them. All it takes is to be laid off or fired, or to come down with some debilitating illness or suffer an injury. Remember the warning in Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” If your goal is happiness, then let God be your “best thought by day or by night.”

More and more students are making a calculated decision to go into medicine or engineering or some other field that really does not interest them, but they are trying to be practical in selecting careers that are going to provide for them. And there is wisdom in practicality. Nevertheless, the reality is that most people change their careers five to seven times throughout their lifetimes for various reasons, many of which are out of their control.<sup>28</sup>

There is an etching in stone in a church in Sussex, England, from 1730 that reads: “A vision without a task is but a dream, / a task without a vision is drudgery, / a vision and a task is the hope of the world.”<sup>29</sup> I feel certain that if you keep God “first in your heart,” as our song encourages you to do, you will partner with Him to allow your life to bring hope to the world. And if the economy should make it unlikely that you are not going to be able to provide for yourself and your family because you earned a Ph.D. in philosophy, if God is your vision and you are “dwelling Him,” He will “be your shelter.” You will not have anything to fear. “In this world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33), but if you keep your eyes on Him, if you let His vision be your vision, if you let Him be your vision, He will guide you at this crucial time in your lives and forever. As the song promises, you will know great victory, and “you will reach heavens’ joys.”

## Notes

1. Commencement Speech, Under the Son Academy Graduation Ceremony, May 15, 2015, at Living Word Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia. The lyrics are easy enough to find in most hymnals and on the Web, but here is one source: <<http://www.songandpraise.org/bethou-my-vision-favorite-hymn.htm>>.
2. John A. Andrews, *Quotes Unlimited* (Sherman Oaks, CA: Books That Will Enhance Your Life, 2009) 156.
3. Nicholas C. Breiner, *Quintessential Choir: Church Edition* (Mount Sterling, KY: Monticello P, 2014) 5.
4. Or Forchella, his mother's maiden name. His dates are 530-598. See William Smith and Henry Wace, "Dallán Forgaill," *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines: Being a Continuation of "The Dictionary of the Bible,"* Vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1877) 780-81
5. John O'Neill, *The Night of the Gods: Complete in Itself: An Inquiry into Cosmic and Cosmogonic Mythology and Symbolism*, Vol. 1 (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893) 556.
6. Smith and Wace 1: 780-81.
7. The historians do not agree as to what exactly the name means other than "blind." *A Dictionary of Christian Biography...*, Vol. 2, (1883) under "Ecochaidh," translates it as "the blind son" of Forchella, where Forchella was his mother's maiden name (130).
8. Peter Marshall, *Prayers Offered by the Chaplain, the Rev. Peter Marshall, D.D.: At the Opening of the Daily Sessions of the Senate of the United States During the Eightieth and Eighty-first Congress 1947-1949* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949) 20.
9. Smith and Wace, 2: 781.

10. John Ellsworth Hutchison-Hall, "Dallán Forgaill," *Orthodox Saints of the British Isles*, Vol. 1 (Los Gatos, CA: St. Eadfrith P, 2013) 85.
11. The song was written by Helen H. Lemmel in 1922. The lyrics and tune are at [cyberhymnal.org](http://cyberhymnal.org).
12. Bill & Gloria Gaither, *The Gaither Homecoming Bible, NKJV* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012) 108.
13. Marian Schindler and Robert Schindler, *Mission Impossible* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1984) 29.
14. Joseph Sanderson, *The Story of Saint Patrick: Embracing a Sketch of the Condition of Ireland Before and After Patrick's Time* (Boston: W. L. Richardson, 1895) 211.
15. Kenneth W. Osbeck. *101 More Hymn Stories*. Part 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1985) 100.
16. Roth, Nancy, *Praise, My Soul: Mediating on Hymns* (New York: Church Pub, 2001) 101.
17. LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox P, 1993) 239
18. Education (England and Wales); Special Reports: Education (Ireland), *Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors, and Others*, Session 12 February 1907-28 August 1907, Vol. 22 (Great Britain: Parliament. House of Commons, 1907) 562.
19. Nick Clarke, *Alistair Cooke: A Biography* (New York: Arcade Pub., 1999) 5-8 and 41.
20. Jonathan Swift, "Thoughts on Various Subject." *Miscellanies*, Vol. 13, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: R. Dodsley, 1851) 231.

21. She published it first in her *Poem Book of the Gael* (1912). See Osbeck 43.
22. Kate Newmann, "Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860-1935)," *Dictionary of Ulster Biography*. Web. <[www.newulsterbiography.co.uk](http://www.newulsterbiography.co.uk)>.
23. Osbeck 101.
24. See her *A History of Ireland and Her People* (1931) at Gutenberg.net. See also Ernest Augustus Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, Vol. 1 (London: Grant Richards, 1923) 422-23.
25. Qtd. in Osbeck 43.
26. Richard A Haynes, *The Spiritual Road: Helping Others Grow Spiritually* (Camarillo, CA: Xulon P) 362, n. 2.
27. David Ewart Parry Williams, "Evans, David," *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. <[wbo.llgc.org.uk/en/s2-EVAN-DAV-1874.html](http://wbo.llgc.org.uk/en/s2-EVAN-DAV-1874.html)>.
28. See Ford R. Myers, *Get the Job You Want Even When No One's Hiring* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2009) 7.
29. Qtd. in Chip R. Bell, *Customers as Partners: Building Relationship that Last* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Pub, 1996) 78.