

A Musical Source for “Shall We Gather at the River”

“Shall We Gather at the River” (to the tune known as “Beautiful River” or “Hanson Place”) is such an iconically American song that one might assume its sources of inspiration in earlier music have been exhaustively researched. But the author of its words and music may have discouraged such research by emphasizing their origins in a spontaneous response to tragic circumstances. According to the composer, the melody and the words were conceived simultaneously, “as if by inspiration.” Unlike the tunes and words of many hymns, those of “Shall We Gather at the River” have been all but inseparable.

Robert Lowry (1826-1899) was a Baptist preacher and musician, a composer of sacred music, especially songbooks for Sunday schools. Edwin M. Long, in his “Illustrated History of Sunday School Song” (separately paginated appendix to *Illustrated History of Hymns and Their Authors*, 2nd. edn., Philadelphia, 1876), p. 64, gave an account of the composition of “Shall We Gather at the River” that he evidently received from Lowry himself:

On a very hot summer day, in 1864, a pastor was seated in his parlor in Brooklyn, N. Y. It was a time when an epidemic was sweeping through the city, and draping many persons and dwellings in mourning. All around friends and acquaintances were passing away to the spirit-land in large numbers. The question began to arise in the heart, with unusual emphasis, “Shall we meet again? We are parting at the river of death, shall we meet at the river of life?” “Seating myself at the organ,” says he, “simply to give vent to the pent up emotions of the heart, the words and music of the hymn began to flow out, as if by inspiration: --

“Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod.”

That pastor was the Rev. Mr. Lowry, who has since become so widely known in connection with Sunday school song.

But musical inspiration rarely operates in a sonic vacuum. As a cultivator of Sunday school music, Lowry may have taken particular notice of a new setting of a celebrated Sunday school hymn, “Little Things,” that had been published in a New York musical journal a few years earlier.

On 15 May 1858 the *New-York Musical Review and Gazette* published a setting of “Little Things” (“Little Drops of Water”), a poem published in 1845 by Julia Abigail Fletcher Carney. Above the music is the attribution “E. A. P. Feb. 16th 1858.” I have not been able to identify the composer.

Little Things

E. A. P. Feb. 16th 1858

Semplice

Lit - tle drops — of — wa - ter, Lit - tle grains of — sand, Make the might - y — o - cean,
So our lit - tle er - rors, Lead the soul a - way, From the paths of vir - tue,

And the beau-teous land. And the lit - tle mo - ments, Hum - ble tho' they be, —
Oft in sin to stray. Lit - tle words of kind-ness, Lit - tle words of love, —
[accompaniment]

13
Make the might - y — a - ges Of e - ter - ni - ty.
Make our earth an E - den, Like the heaven a - bove.

This music anticipates Lowry's in several respects. The opening phrases are almost identical in melody and harmony. The two melodies share a descent from the fifth scale degree to the third in m. 10. The dotted idea in m. 11, oscillating between the fourth and third scale degrees, is echoed in Lowry's tune.

Sitting at his organ on that hot summer day in 1864, Lowry played a tune that has become an indelible part of the American musical landscape. But what he remembered as an act of spontaneous invention was probably, at least in part, a remembering and recombining of musical elements from a hymn published six years earlier.

