

How Great Thou Art

By Harry Eskew

“How Great Thou Art” has a complicated history involving several countries and several languages. Fortunately, George Beverly Shea gave a first-hand account of this hymn in *Crusade Hymn Stories* (Chicago: Hope Publishing Company, 1867), 8-9. Used here with permission:

“During the London crusade at Haringay Arena in 1954, my friend, Mr. Andrew Gray, of the publishing firm Pickering and Inglis, Ltd., handed me a little four-page leaflet containing a “new hymn.” We received many contributions of this kind and at first I did not examine it closely. But I did notice that it had words in both English and Russian, and that it had a very strong and worshipful title, “How Great Thou Art.”

A few weeks later I learned that this “new hymn” by S. K. Hine was the final result of almost seventy years of literary activity, involving several different writers and translators. It had first been written in Sweden in 1886 by Rev. Carl Boberg, a well-known **How** preacher and religious editor, who also served for fifteen years as a senator in the Swedish parliament. The original title was “O Store Gud” (O Great God).

An earlier translation into English was published in 1925 under the title “O Mighty God,” but it never really caught on. “How Great Thou Art” arrived in America by a much more devious route!

The German version “Wie gross bist Du” had been translated from the original Swedish by Manfred von Glehn, a resident of Estonia, in 1907. Five years later, in 1912, the Rev. Ivan S. Prokhanoff—known as the “Martin Luther of modern Russia”—published the hymn in St. Petersburg in his own language, probably translating it from von Geln’s German poem. It is included in a booklet entitled *Cymbals*—“a collection of spiritual songs translated from various languages.”

In 1922, several of Prokhanoff’s hymn-booklets, including *Cymbals*, were combined in a large volume, *The Songs of a Christian*. It was published in Russian in New York City, by Prokhanoff’s friends of the American Bible Society. Finally in 1927, this larger book was reprinted in Russia, again through the assistance of Prokhanoff’s American supporters. This new release of Russian evangelical hymns brought “How Great Thou Art” to the attention of an English missionary couple, Mr. and Mrs. Stuart K. Hine, and it was widely used by them in evangelism in the western Ukraine. After singing it for many years in Russian, Mr. Hine translated three verses into English. When World War II broke out, the Hines returned to Britain, where the fourth stanza was added in 1948.

The completed song was printed in 1949 in a Russian gospel magazine published by Mr. Hine. Reprints were requested by missionaries all over the world, and it was one of those leaflets that was given to us in 1954. We first sang “How Great Thou Art” in the Toronto, Canada, Crusade of 1955. Cliff Barrows and his large volunteer choir assisted in

the majestic refrains. Soon after, we used it on the “Hour of Decision” and in American crusades. In the New York meetings of 1957 the choir joined me in singing it ninety-three times! It became a keynote of praise each evening.

Although the popularity of “How Great Thou Art” was in large measure due to its use in the Billy Graham meetings, its fame has spread in multiple languages and regions. It has been translated into many languages, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. It has been voted the United Kingdom’s favorite hymn by the BBC’s Songs of Praise broadcast. It has been cited as the favorite gospel song of at least three United States presidents. And there are over 1700 documented recordings of “How Great Thou Art.”

I recall the appearance of George Beverly Shea in a sacred solo concert during the annual Church Music Symposium years ago at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He was accompanied on the piano by Kurt Kaiser, composer of “O How He Loves You and Me.” Although it was a solo concert, when Mr. Shea closed by singing “How Great Thou Art,” he invited all of us to join him on the majestic refrain, truly a moving expression of our heartfelt praise and thanks to Almighty God.