

“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee”

Hymn Story by Harry Eskew

While a student preparing for the Baptist ministry at Andover Theological Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts, Samuel F. Smith wrote this popular patriotic hymn, memorized by schoolchildren around the nation and partially quoted in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” a claim to the great documents of this country which accelerated the Civil Rights Movement. Smith’s friend, the pioneer music educator and hymn tune composer Lowell Mason, had received several German hymnals and tunebooks collected by William C. Woodbridge in his travels to Europe. Unable to read German, Mason passed the books to Smith to examine for possible translations into English for American use.

Proficient in German, Smith was impressed by Siegfried Mahlmann’s patriotic text, “*Gott segne Sachsenland*” (God bless Saxony), written in 1815. He decided to model a patriotic hymn of his own after it, adopting the same poetic meter. In a very short time, he wrote “My country, ‘tis of thee,” which reflects his New England terrain: “I love thy rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills.” Smith closed the hymn with a prayer addressed to God:

Our sovereign God, to Thee,
Author of liberty,
to Thee we sing;
long may our land be bright with freedom’s holy light;
protect us by Thy might, great God, our king!

A children’s choir under Mason’s direction first sang “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” in a service sponsored by the Boston Sabbath School Union at Park Street Church on July 4, 1831. The following year, Mason published the patriotic hymn along with the tune AMERICA in his collection, *Choir, or Universal Collection of Church Music*. Ironically, the tune used for the singing of Smith’s hymn is known as AMERICA in the United States, but it is the same tune used in the United Kingdom for their national anthem, “God Save the Queen.”

My country, ‘tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing:
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims’ pride,
From every mountain side
Let freedom ring.

My native country thee,
Land of the noble free,
Thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills,

Thy woods and templed hills,
My heart with rapture thrills
Like that above.

Let music swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song.
Let mortal tongues awake;
Let all that breathe partake;
Let rocks their silence break,
The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God,
To thee, author of liberty,
To thee we sing,
Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light,
Protect us by thy might,
Great God, our King.