



AUGUST JOHANN FRIEDRICH CRULL (1845 – 1923)

... easily merits Lutherans' attention for his hymn translations, which we still sing. Crull's early life began in Rostock, Germany, where he lost his father, a respected attorney, at a young age. His mother then married Pastor Alfred Hoppe (1828 - 1911), later known as the editor of the St. Louis edition of Luther's works. After the family's emigration to America in 1855, Crull studied for a ministerial vocation, eventually graduating from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1865. Following a brief pastoral experience he returned to Germany seeking medical help for serious throat problems.

During this time, however, Crull was contacted by C. F. W. Walther, first president of what has become the Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod (LCMS), who foresaw a growing need for English-language materials, including hymns. Walther urged Crull to return and help with this important work.¹ Crull came back to the USA and eventually was called to teach at the pre-seminary program in Fort Wayne. There he offered language and literature, both German and French, until his retirement in 1915. His final years, spent in Milwaukee with family members, were apparently marred by mental illness. Although remembered today for his hymn translations, he also edited several volumes of German poetry as well as authoring a German-language grammar textbook and publishing devotional works based on the writings of C. F. W. Walther.

¹ See Jon Vieker, *August Crull* . . . , 29f., for extensive quotes from Walther's communications.

There is in American Lutheranism a strong tradition, not always evident, of interaction and cooperation. Crull, for example, was invited to edit one of the very early Lutheran hymnals in English, the 1879 *Hymn Book for the Use of Lutheran Schools and Congregations*, published in Decorah, Iowa, for a primarily Norwegian-American constituency.² While there had been several earlier English-language hymnals, principally in the eastern and southern states, Crull's *Hymn Book* is recognized as the first English book to be published by Norwegian-Americans. It was, however, also used by a significant number of people of German background.³ This small book of 130 hymns and ten doxologies helped draw English-speaking Lutherans into contact with the mainstream of English hymnody, thus setting the tone down to the present day. Crull himself contributed nine translations but also drew heavily on such English translators as Catherine Winkworth (53 credits).

Crull's greatest legacy, however, has to be his contributions to the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn Book* (ELHB) of 1889. Behind this book one must recognize the existence of the so-called English Synod (formally: General English Lutheran Conference of Missouri and Other States). Although a separate ecclesiastical structure, it served as an arm of the German Lutheran LCMS for work in English-speaking communities. Later its congregations became a non-geographical "district" of the LCMS. The ELHB was developed as the worship book for this new synod, though the persons involved in producing it were largely from the LCMS of the time. In fact, the book was first submitted to the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for the usual doctrinal review. This process, however, dragged out so long that Crull proposed bypassing that review

² It should be noted that some standard hymnal commentaries refer to an 1879 publication by Crull titled *The Lutheran Hymnary*. This is presumably an error, confusing Crull's book with another Norwegian hymnal using this title, of which the Lutheran Publishing House was co-publisher. *The Lutheran Hymnary* first appeared in 1913.

³ See Carl Schalk, *God's Song in a New Land* (St. Louis, 1995), p. 119.

and submitting the new book directly to the convention of the English Synod.

Crull, working with a committee, was the principal editor of the ELHB. It was not the first or only English Lutheran hymnal of the time, but it tried to set high standards and defined the hymnal tradition which eventually served the LCMS. Crull drew considerably on his contributions to the Decorah Hymnal and on C. F. W. Walther's hymn choices in the *Kirchegesangbuch für Evangelisch-Lutherische Gemeinden ...* (KELG) of 1847. Crull pulled together roughly 400 hymns, nearly half of which were translations of German chorales. The German Lutherans, including Walther, were suspicious of doctrinal problems in non-Lutheran English hymnals but still saw the value in many individual English hymns. One sees here the earliest signs of a Lutheran embrace of the hymnody of the whole Christian church.

But there were problems. One was the liturgy of the new book, devised by Pastor William Dallmann. Apparently urged on by fellow pastors, he contributed his own order of service, against Crull's advice. In subsequent editions this liturgy had to be replaced by the Common Service used by many other English-speaking Lutherans. A second delay was the slow process of doctrinal review by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This was eventually resolved by approving the book through the independently constituted English Synod. A third issue was the ill-advised emendation of some hymn translations by committee members. Crull had to fight back these problems, in at least one case (Luther's "From Heaven Above") creating an improvement on translations by Catherine Winkworth and Richard Massie that is still found in current Lutheran hymnals.

For Crull the crowning blow came in the printing of the new book. The printer apparently jumbled type faces, misconstrued translated texts, and generated an enormous number of typographical errors (over 200 in one stretch of hymns). Crull argued that the printing should be

rejected even though this would seriously delay availability of the book. His advice was not taken, though the books that were still unbound were given some corrected pages.

As the hymnbook development went forward, Crull was strangely not reappointed to the committee, though he was nonetheless frequently consulted. Eventually he declined to help with editing the subsequent editions of the ELHB on the grounds of ill health, though his correspondence offered some rather pointed criticisms. The book went through more revisions and was brought up to good standards when the LCMS published a revision as its first official English-language hymnal in 1912. Crull's expert influence was thus channeled into American Lutheranism down to our own time.

Crull's legacy of hymn translations lives on nearly a century after his death. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW) credits him with four texts, though Paul Westermeyer's hymnal commentary links his name with an additional seven. *Lutheran Service Book* (LSB) ups the credits to fourteen while *Christian Worship* (CW) trumps that with seventeen. Clearly Crull continues to play a considerable role in our worship.

That we all share Crull's translations speaks also to the lasting strength of a common Lutheran heritage. This insight is also born out by the fact that many of Crull's translations have found a place in all our recent hymnals. We count among his well-used and beloved texts "Let All Together Praise Our God," "God Loved the World," "Draw us to Thee," "Jesus, I Will Ponder Now," "Abide, O Dearest Jesus," to name but a few.

Finally, Crull's work reminds us of the rather complex role of translators in defining our hymn traditions. Ideally translators are well versed in at least two languages and must also be gifted as poets if the translated text is to appear in gracious diction. Further, the translator (with editorial committees staring over her or his shoulder!) must capture the finest nuances of

theology and true piety if the translation is to be faithful both to the original author and the cultural norms of the church in the current age. It's a tough job! In remembering August Crull let us give thanks not only for the great hymn writers but also for all the faithful translators who keep our heritage fresh from age to age in language we all can use.

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Though based on an item originally published in Grace Notes, a newsletter of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, this writing also benefits from the publications of Jon Vieker (noted below) that have appeared more recently.

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