

# O Foyful Light...

*Alumna and parent Michele Martin fondly recalls singing the school hymn 'Hymn of Light' and the memories it evokes in alumnae.*

BY MICHELE MARTIN  
South Hampstead alumna 1983

For the first two years of my daughter's time at South Hampstead Senior School, I would ask her the same question at the end of each term. 'Did you sing the song?' I'd say and she'd stare back at me blankly. On netball runs, I'd ask her friends in the back of my car the same thing and none of them knew what I was talking about either.

I was at South Hampstead between 1976 and 1983 and one of my strongest memories is singing the 'Hymn of Light' at the end of each term. I remember sitting cross-legged on the darkly-polished floor of the old hall, waiting for the piano to play the opening chords. And when it began, the sense of emotion was palpable, as if the teachers loved it as much as the girls.

I don't remember being taught why the song was important, but it obviously still resonates with a lot of us. In the last issue of Resplendens, Class of 1982 alumna Liz Lefroy wrote movingly about a reunion where everyone gathered in a friend's kitchen and sang it, until 'there was hardly a dry eye between us.' Another former student played it at her wedding.

Part of it might be the tune. We will never know whose idea it was to appropriate 'Danny Boy', but it was stroke of genius. And then there are those words: beautiful, shimmering with religious imagery without being religious. When you sang: 'So shine in us our little love reproving/That souls of men and kindle at the flame', you felt that your actions might actually change what was around you.

And yet my daughter and her friends didn't know it, which got me wondering what had happened to it. Had the school decided it was too old-fashioned and discretely side-lined it?

The only thing we know for certain is that the 'Hymn of Light' was inspired by the reputed final words of writer and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe declared 'Mehr Licht!' on his deathbed in 1832 and it has been the school's inspirational motto for decades (although, ironically, there is some dispute about whether he was asking for spiritual enlightenment or for the shutters to be opened in his darkened room.)

Other than that, its composer and the date of its composition are unclear. One story says that it was the work of a former pupil, while a Google search reveals that a student called Betty Sutton composed a very similar 'Hymn of Light' for her school

in South Africa in the 1930s. Maybe there was a little plagiarism at some point, but who borrowed from whom, we'll never know. Hopefully, it went in the right direction.

Former students and teachers both remember singing 'Hymn of Light' by the late 1950s. Jean Middlemiss was South Hampstead's first Director of Music between 1957 and 1972 and she recalls it being something she inherited. 'I didn't invent it,' she says, 'it was thrust upon me. We always sang it at the end of term and there was always twice the volume for it compared with other hymns. But we never thought of it as a school song.'

Perhaps that was because it wasn't the only school anthem. According to the programme for prize giving on March 18th 1971, the final song of the afternoon was not the Hymn of Light but 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men', a song taken from Ecclesiasticus XLIV and set to music by composer Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Class of 1970 alumna Lorna Hawtin (nee Dixie) remembers that its call to praise men 'reknowned for their power' never sat well with the girls. 'Even back then, the school felt quite feminist,' she says. 'There were a lot of teachers who had lost their prospective husbands in the war and who'd had to make a life for themselves. I thought it was extraordinarily odd at the time, but didn't have the courage to say: "What the hell are we doing singing this?"'

But evidently somebody did, because in 1976, the 'Hymn of Light' had moved up the rankings. On the title page of 'The Kindling and the Flame' - a history celebrating the school's centenary in 1976 - former headmistress Prunella R Bodington included a quote from the 'Hymn of Light' and underneath added that the words had been: 'Translated from the 4th century Greek, adapted for the Jubilee Service and since used as a school hymn'. A school hymn, note, not *the* school hymn, but significant enough to have made it to the front of the book.

Certainly, I don't remember singing 'Famous Men' at all when I joined the Upper Third in 1977. Instead, the 'Hymn of Light' grabbed my imagination from the beginning as a call to empowerment. I believed the song when it said that 'the whole world's hatred' could be 'broken by our loving' and that this love was non-patriarchal and non-religious.

Liz Lefroy agrees. She says: 'I remember we sang the 'Hymn of Light' as the last event of each term and I found that very





The Choir  
Miss Chorley with  
Miss (Mrs) (Miss) (Mrs)  
Rehearsal in Hall -

emotional. You were about to be released into freedom and there was a sense of solidarity in that moment, whatever had happened in the term. There were 450 girls all sitting there cross-legged, watching everyone else get prizes and this was the bit for everyone. And because we often had separate assemblies (for the Jewish girls) it was something that joined us together. The fact that it was secular was really important.'

So what had happened to the 'Hymn of Light'? Was it still being sung by my daughter and her friends? I asked Jess Chorley, the school's current music administrator. She was herself a pupil at South Hampstead between 2000 and 2012 and she seemed surprised by the question.

Yes, of course it was, she told me. Students sang it at the first assembly of the year in September so that the new girls could hear it and then again at the end of each term. 'We don't teach it to the students,' she added, 'because after four years of singing it four times a year, you pick it up.' But not my daughter, I said. Well maybe your daughter hasn't been paying as much attention as she might, Miss Chorley said.

Fast forward to the last day of autumn term, 2018. My daughter is now in Year 9 and has just come home from school, exhausted, more than ready for the holidays.

Knowing I'm writing this, I give it one last throw of the dice and ask her: 'So what happened in assembly today? Did you - sing anything?' And to my utter astonishment, her face lit up and she said: 'Oh yes.' And she started to sing the Hymn of Light, almost word perfect, and I felt tears welling up.

'So what happened?' I asked when she'd finished. 'How come you've always said you don't know it? Have you only just started singing it?' 'No,' she said, 'we've always sung it, but I didn't really pay any attention until the end of Year 8.'

So Miss Chorley was right. Eventually they really do just pick it up - and take it with them, like the rest of us, into their future lives.

## Hymn of Light

*O Joyful Light, for in Thee only*

*In trust we seek, and seeking find a way:*

*Strength of the tempted, Father of the lonely,  
From out our darkness bringest Thou the day.*

*Lo, having Thee, we lose not one another,*

*Sundered - united, dying but to birth;*

*All worlds are one in Thee, O more than brother,*

*And one our family in Heaven and on Earth.*

*So shine in us, our little love reproofing,*

*That souls of men may kindle at the flame:*

*The whole world's hatred, broken by our loving,*

*Shall bow to Love, Thine everlasting Name.*

*Therefore to Thee be praises and thanksgiving,*

*O Holy Father, Energy Divine:*

*We lift our hearts and sing, with all things living,*

*O Light of Life, the Glory that is Thine.*