



Christian Biography Resources

Ira D. Sankey

His Birth and Boyhood — Education — Mission

by Elias Mason

Birth — Education — Love of Music — Religious Impressions — Conversion — Unites with the Church — Superintendent of Sunday School, and Class Leader — Study of the Bible — Army Life — Connection with the Revenue Service — His Character — Sings in Conventions — President of the Young Men's Christian Association — Meets Mr. Moody — Consents to labor with him — Singing in Chicago — His Manner and Motives — A Touching Story — Takes Charge of the Service at the Tabernacle — His only Hymn — Visits Great Britain — Overcomes Prejudice — His Singing popular — Effects of his Music — In the Highlands — Opinion of an Edinburgh Journalist — Of Another Writer — Popularity of Certain Songs — Theatre and Circus, London — "Ninety and Nine" — His Singing at Brooklyn; at Philadelphia — His Views of Church Music — His Singing at New York — Address at the Close — Gospel Songs No. 2 — Singing in Boston — A Prayer for Song — Mr. Sankey's Tact and Power — Remarks of "The Inter-Ocean;" of Mrs. Barbour — Mr. Sankey's Personal Appearance — An Address to him by Mr. Caverly.

"Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."—St. Paul.

"A verse may win him whom the gospel flies,
And turn delight into a sacrifice."—George Herbert.

"Music speaks the heart's emotion,
Music tells the soul's devotion;
Music heavenly harps employs,
Music wakens heavenly joys."—Anon.



The delightful and effective singer and composer Ira David Sankey was born in the little village of Edinburg, Lawrence County, Pennsylvania, [United States], on the twenty-eighth day of August, 1840, and is therefore at the present time thirty-six years old. His parents, David and Mary Sankey, the former of English, and the latter of Scotch-Irish descent, are respectable and pious people. They brought up their children — nine in number — in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. They taught them also how to speak our language with propriety.

In early boyhood Ira began to manifest a love for sacred music, and the sweetness of his voice was noticed in the sabbath school which he attended. He had a pleasant disposition, an engaging manner, and a bright, sunny smile, which won the hearts of all who knew him. "He was," says one of his companions, "the finest little fellow in the neighborhood." His attention to the subject of personal religion, as he himself relates, was first awakened by an old Scottish farmer of the name of Frazer, living in the neighborhood. "The very first recollection I have of any thing pertaining to a holy life," said Mr. Sankey in addressing a company of children in the city of Dundee, Scotland, "was in connection with that man. I remember he took me by the hand, along with his own boys, to the sabbath school, — that old place which I shall remember to my dying day. He was a plain man, and I can see him standing up and praying for the children. He had a great, warm heart, and the children all loved him. It was years after that when I was converted; but my impressions were received when I was very young, from that man."

On attaining the age of fifteen years he began to compose tunes for his own amusement; and he was soon after led during a revival of religion in Edinburg, by the entreaties of an old

steward of the church, to consecrate himself entirely to the service of the Lord. This brought to him that peace of mind which passeth understanding. Not long afterwards his father removed with his family to the large town of Newcastle, Pennsylvania, where the young singer had the benefit of some academical instruction, and obtained the rudiments of a useful English education. He also became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

He made the word of God and sacred music his chief study, and the tones of his sweet, silvery voice in the songs of devotion attracted many people to the house of worship. Such was the beauty of his Christian life, such his knowledge of the Bible, that in 1859 the church appointed him superintendent of the Sunday school, and subsequently a class-leader. In training the voices of his school to sing, his own musical taste was improved, his reputation as a vocalist extended; while his discussions as a class-leader with those older than himself led him to a closer examination of the sacred volume. "Tell me your condition," said he to his beloved class, "in Bible language. The Scriptures abound in accounts of religious feeling of all descriptions. There is no state of grace which may not be described by a text."

As a leader of the choir, he insisted on the proper deportment of the singers, as well as on the correct expression of the sentiment of the hymn. He believed that song was intended for the dissemination of the gospel; and he early began to sing solos for this purpose. In this way he was making preparation, though unconsciously, for the glorious work in which he is now engaged.

On the call of President Lincoln in 1861, for men to sustain the Government, Mr. Sankey was among the first in Newcastle to have his name enrolled as a soldier. He remained in the army, enlivening the camp and endearing his companions to him by the sweetness of his music and his temper, until the expiration of his term of service, when he returned to Newcastle to assist his father in his office as collector of the revenue.

"In the civil service, as in other departments of labor," says one who knew him intimately, "he was noted for conscientiousness, and patient, faithful attention to duty. In his rank he stood first in the district, and had the entire confidence of all the officers and taxpayers with whom he had official dealings. In his long connection with the service, there were never known any irregularities in his accounts, or any loss to the government. On this account he left the service with honor and with the regret of those who were associated with him."

On the 9th of September, 1863, he married Miss Edwards, a member of the church, a singer in his choir, and a teacher in his sabbath school. She is an estimable woman, and the mother of three sons; of whom Henry, the oldest, is now beginning to assist his father in his evangelism. One of the children was born in Scotland.

While engaged in the civil service, Mr. Sankey found many opportunities, especially in the way of sacred song, to labor for his Lord and Master. His fame as a singer had spread through Western Pennsylvania, and invitation after invitation crowded in upon him to attend conventions, conferences, and other public gatherings, for the purpose of singing his beautiful solos, and of leading other voices in song. These invitations he generally accepted, believing that the gospel should be sung as well as preached; yet his rule was never to receive any compensation for his services.

He had not studied music scientifically, or even as an art. His intention had never been to make the practice of it a profession; but he saw in it a mighty force for the advancement of the kingdom of the Redeemer. He consecrated his power of song, as every other gift, entirely to that noble cause, and God has wonderfully blessed the consecration.

Some time in the early part of 1867, a Young Men's Christian Association was, through the activity of Mr. Sankey and other gentlemen, formed in Newcastle, of which he subsequently was elected president. Through this institution his Christian influence was extended, and he became instrumental in leading many by his voice of prayer and praise into a Christian life.

The acquaintance between him and Mr. Moody began in June, 1870, at an international convention held in Indianapolis, to which he had been sent as a delegate. The singing at an

early morning prayer-meeting being intolerably dull, Mr. Sankey was invited to take charge of it. Coming forward modestly, he complied with the request; and such was the charm of his manner, such were the sympathetic and flexible tones of his voice, varying so as to express every emotion of the soul, such were the freshness, tenderness, and beauty of his songs, that every heart was won. Though ignorant of music, Mr. Moody understands full well its power; and he saw in Mr. Sankey just the man whom he had long been searching for to aid him in his work.

On being introduced to the sweet singer, he said to him in his characteristic way,—

"Where do you live?"

"In Newcastle, Pennsylvania," Mr. Sankey answered.

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"How many children have you?"

"One."

"I want you."

"What for?"

"To help me in my work at Chicago."

"I cannot leave my business."

"You must: I have been looking for you for the last eight years. You must give up your business, and come to Chicago with me."

"I will think of it," replied Mr. Sankey. "I will pray over it; I will talk it over with my wife."

The result was that the singer of Newcastle, after prayer and consultation with his wife, determined to identify his interests with those of Mr. Moody, to live with him the life of trust, and enter on the work of evangelization in the city of Chicago. In this almost romantic way commenced that Christian fellowship between these two gifted servants of the Lord, which the toils and trials of six long years have cemented as a bond that death alone can sever.

Although Mr. Philip Phillips, author of "I love to sing for Jesus," and other beautiful tunes, had in some measure prepared the people of Chicago to listen to the "solo singing of the gospel," still many supposed it an unscriptural innovation; yet such was the melody, the flexibility, and pathetic charm of Mr. Sankey's voice, that opposition soon changed to admiration, and his services soon came to be justly appreciated by the clergy and the churches. He entered heart and soul into the missionary work of Mr. Moody, and led the great congregation and sabbath school in his church, as well as at Farwell Hall, in the service of song, giving it life and variety by intermingling with the mighty choruses some touching strain, as, "Sweet Hour of Prayer," "He leadeth me," or, "I love to tell the Story," sung tenderly and touchingly by himself alone.

These hallowed and refreshing songs, rising sweetly at the close of some earnest appeal of Mr. Moody's, would melt the audience into tears; and amidst the profoundest feeling every tone would touch the heart, as if an angel's wing were sweeping over it.

Mr. Sankey sings, not for money nor for reputation, but for the lofty purpose of winning men to Christ. He believes in the power of song to do this. His songs are Bible songs: he puts his soul, and that an inspired soul, into them. He makes the music all subservient to the sentiment, and so, by its heavenly ministry, fixes it in the listener's mind. Though not an

artist, he sings with such excellent taste that the cultivated ear receives his simple melodies with delight. The gospel in song thus becomes more charming and potential in its sway. He himself relates a most touching instance of its influence:—

"During the winter after the great Chicago fire, when the place was built up with little frame houses for the poor people to stay in, a mother sent for me one day, to come and see her little child, who was one of our sabbath-school scholars. I remembered her very well, having seen her in the meetings, and was glad to go. She was lying in one of these poor little huts, every thing having been burned in the fire. I ascertained that she was past all hopes of recovery, and that they were waiting for the little one to pass away. 'How is it with you to-day?' I asked. With a beautiful smile on her face, she said, 'It is all well with me to-day. I wish you would speak to my father and mother.' — 'But,' said I, 'are you a Christian?'— 'Yes.' — 'When did you become one?' — 'Do you remember last Thursday in the Tabernacle, when we had that little singing meeting, and you sung, "Jesus loves even me"?'¹ — 'Yes.' — 'It was last Thursday I believed on the Lord Jesus, and now I am going to be with him to-day.'

"That testimony from that little child in that neglected quarter of Chicago has done more, to stimulate me, and bring me to this country [Scotland], than all that the papers or any persons might say. I remember the joy I had in looking upon that beautiful face. She went up to heaven, and no doubt said she learned upon the earth that Jesus loved her, from that little hymn. If you want to enjoy a blessing, go to the bedsides of these bedridden and dying ones, and sing to them of Jesus, for they cannot enjoy these meetings as you do. You will get a great blessing to your own soul."

¹The words and music of this beautiful song are by the late lamented P. P. Bliss, killed by the railway accident at the bridge over the Ashtabula River in Ohio, Dec. 29, 1876.

When the conflagration in October, 1871, had swept away that section of Chicago where the two evangelists were laboring, Mr. Sankey returned to his home at Newcastle; but as soon as the rude Tabernacle was erected he came back, and, lodging in a small room in the building, assisted Mr. Moody in supplying the wants of the destitute, and in carrying on the mission work in that quarter. It was at that period that the touching incident just given occurred; and by it Mr. Sankey's soul was moved to make a profounder consecration of its powers to the service of the Lord. He not only sung, but spoke and prayed, for the conversion of the people; he selected Bible hymns or "spiritual songs" of sterling merit; he adapted them to lively music, sometimes of his own composing; he encouraged others to compose; he conducted meetings, leading in all the services himself; and, during Mr. Moody's visit to England in the spring of 1872, he took charge of the work and worship at the Tabernacle. On his return Mr. Moody found him cherishing the same Biblical spirit which he himself had imbibed in England; and they both, as fitting counterparts in sweet accordance, toiled together, comforting and reviving many churches.

In the mean time Mr. Sankey, with remarkable good taste, was selecting from the new stores of hymnology and revival tunes such spirited and popular pieces as would best promote his evangelical work. In addition to the beautiful airs of Bradbury, Lowry, Main, Root, Grape, Phillips, Doane, and Bliss, he composed many excellent times himself; and with the fine lyrics of Annie S. Hawks, Fanny J. Crosby, Lydia Baxter, Prof. Gilmore, Ellen H. Gates, Anna Warner, Kate Hankey, Mrs. Bliss, and others, had, as it were, a stock of sacred songs adapted to almost every exigence. His voice, which is a rich baritone, was constantly gaining power, and no singer ever better than he knew how to suit his music to the time and the occasion. The composition of hymns he does not consider within his sphere; yet "For me," for the only one of his that has been published, indicates that he is endowed with poetical as well as musical ability. Among his tunes, "The Ninety and Nine," to words of Miss E. C. Clephane, is perhaps the most popular.

Mr. Sankey with his family accompanied Mr. Moody in his remarkable evangelistic tour through Great Britain, and assisted him materially in producing that grand awakening which filled all

Christendom with surprise. It was feared at first that his new style of songs, his solo singing, and his melodeon, would meet with great opposition on the part of Christians, especially in Scotland, where Rouse's rough version of the Psalms and the plain old tunes had become so deeply imbedded in the hearts of the people. But the American minstrel put so much of his soul and of the gospel into his song that he soon overcame all prejudice, and made himself the most popular sacred singer in the United Kingdom.

In passing from Southampton through mid-England, in the summer of 1875, the writer was surprised, as well as delighted, to see the songs of Mr. Sankey in various forms for sale at almost every station, and to hear them sung by laborers and by children in the streets. America seemed to have filled the heart of England with her music.

Of Mr. Sankey's service of song in Edinburgh, Dr. Thompson said, "Those who have come and heard have departed with their prejudices vanquished, and their hearts impressed." The Rev. Mr. Taylor also said, "As Mr. Sankey proceeded to sing, we felt that it was real teaching. Not only was there his wonderful voice, which made every word distinctly heard in every corner of the hall, and to which the organ accompaniment was felt to be merely subsidiary, but it was the scriptural thought borne into the mind by the wave of song, and kept there till we were obliged to look at it and feel it in its importance and its preciousness."

Mr. Sankey not only sang, but preached the gospel, conducting meetings, and, though not delivering sermons, inviting in simple and persuasive words the people to the cross of Jesus. While addressing a group of inquirers at Glasgow on everlasting life, and emphasizing the word *hath*, a woman listening attentively exclaimed, "That word *hath* has done it all," and went away rejoicing in the Lord. In Paisley he produced a profound impression by singing in his moving way "Nothing but Leaves, the Spirit grieves." At Perth the song, "Go work in My Vineyard," awakened the great congregation to labor more earnestly for the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom. At Aberdeen he was assisted, as in many other places, by a most efficient choir of male and female voices, and his American melodies produced a wonderful effect. His songs met with special favor in the North of Scotland, where it was supposed that the prejudice against them would be strongest. "In the remote Highland glen," says an interesting writer, "you may hear the sound of hymn-singing: shepherds on the steep hill-sides sing Mr. Sankey's hymns while tending their sheep; errand-boys whistle the tunes as they walk along the streets of the Highland towns; while in not a few of the lordly castles of the North, they express genuine feeling."

The Daily Edinburgh Review thus spoke of the singing of Mr. Sankey in Scotland:—

"Why should there be any prejudice? For generations most of the Highland ministers, and some of the Lowland ministers too, have sung the gospel, sung their sermons, ay, and sung their prayers too. The only difference is, that they sing very badly, and Mr. Sankey very beautifully. He accompanied himself on 'the American organ,' it is true; and some of us who belong to the old school can't swallow the 'kist of whistles' yet. It may help us over this stumbling-block if we consider, that, with the finest voice and ear in the world, nobody could maintain the proper pitch of a melody, singing so long as Mr. Sankey does. And then, 'the American organ' is only a 'little one.' When a deputation from the session waited on Ralph Erskine, to remonstrate with him on the enormity of fiddling, he gave them a beautiful tune on the violoncello; and they were so charmed that they returned to their constituents with the report that it was all right: 'it was na' the wee, sinfu' fiddle that their minister operated upon, but a grand instrument, full of grave, tweet melody.' I'm afraid some good, true Presbyterians will be excusing Mr. Sankey's organ, and themselves for listening to it, by some such plea as that."

Another wrote:

"The admiration of Mr. Sankey's music is enthusiastic. When he sings a solo, a death-like silence reigns in the audience. When he ceases there is a rustling like the leaves of a forest when stirred by the wind. We might apply to him the language of Scripture, 'Lo! thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one who hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument.' No one can estimate

the service he has rendered to the Church of Christ by the compilation of his book of 'Sacred Songs,' and their sweet tunes. They are the delight of all ages. I have heard in Scotland that they are already sung in our most distant colonies. Ere long, I believe, they will be sung wherever the English language is spoken over the earth. Nor will they be confined to that language, for a lady is already translating them into German."

In Belfast the newsboys cried out as they went on their daily rounds, "Hymn-books with songs sung at Moody and Sankey's meetings!" and sold them in large numbers through the city. In Londonderry Mr. Sankey was so well sustained by the local choir, that his co-worker said he had never before heard such sweet music, adding, that he thought they should sing "new songs" as well as old ones, and that they could sing the gospel into many a man's heart.

In Manchester a Mr. Cook, one evening at the Royal Theatre, sung in imitation of the popular song "He's a fraud," the words,—

"We know that Moody and Sankey
Are doing some good in their way,"—

and received both cheers and hisses from the audience; but, on repeating the words, the displeasure was so great that he was obliged to leave the stage. This testimony of theatre-going people even, in favor of the evangelists, was noticed in the morning papers, and the fact also that the song was not repeated.

Public sentiment in favor of the evangelists was the same in Dublin. During the performance at the circus, on a certain evening, one clown said to another, "I'm rather *moody* to-night: how do you feel?" To which the other answered, "I feel rather *sankey-monious*." This was met with hisses, and the whole audience joined with grand effect in singing,—

"Hold the fort, for I am coming,
Jesus signals still;
Wave the answer back to heaven,
By thy grace we will."

The greatest favorite at Birmingham was "Hold the Fort," by Mr. Bliss. The vast audiences joined in the stirring chorus, filling the Bingley Hall with rousing peals of sacred song. In London "The Ninety and Nine" and "Only ain Armor-Bearer" appeared to afford the most delight; but other hymns, as, "Almost Persuaded," and "The Prodigal Child," by Mrs. Ellen H. Gates, became immensely popular, and were daily heard in all quarters of the city.

While in London, the Princess of Wales, the Duchess of Sutherland, and other distinguished personages, attended the revival meetings, and united heartily in the choruses of Mr. Sankey's songs. His singing here won many hearts, and his labors amongst the inquirers were, as usual, owned and blessed of God. The testimony of one young man is that of many: "I went," says he, "into the inquiry-room, and Mr. Sankey walked up and down with me, and talked with me as if he had been my own father; and I found Christ." At the close of the meetings in Liverpool, Mr. Sankey sung as a farewell song, "Home, Sweet Home," with remarkable pathos, moving many in the audience to tears.

Mr. Sankey gathered several new and beautiful hymns and tunes during his mission-tour abroad, with which he has since enriched his sacred song-books. He found the words of the song "Ninety and Nine," in "The Christian Age" of London, and immediately composed the music for them. They were written (as he afterwards ascertained through letter from her sister) by Miss Elizabeth C. Clephane of Melrose, Scotland, a short time before the author's death, and were first published in Dr. Arnott's "Family Treasury," in 1868. The hymn commencing,—

"Beneath the cross of Jesus
I fain would take my stand,"—

for which Mr. Sankey also wrote the music, is by the same author. Soon after his return to America in 1875, Mr. Sankey published, in connection with Mr. P. P. Bliss, "Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs," of which an immense number of copies have been sold. It contains eight of his own musical compositions.

At the Tabernacle in Brooklyn, Mr. Sankey was supported by a well-trained choir of two hundred and fifty voices; and the singing during the revival was remarkably good. The pieces sung were familiar to the people, and fears were entertained lest on this account the effect would not be as great as it had been across the sea; but in this all were happily disappointed. One of the first hymns given out was, "Hark! the Voice of Jesus crying;" and, says a reporter,

"as Mr. Sankey's magnetic voice and wonderfully expressive singing filled the great auditorium, the sympathy among his hearers grew and increased until it seemed as if, had he continued the sweet melody and earnest supplication, every person in the whole audience would have risen and joined with him in a grand musical prayer of mingled appeal and thanksgiving. The effect he produced was simply marvelous. Many responses, such as 'Amen!' and 'Glory to God!' were heard from all parts of the vast assembly; and at the close a great many men, as well as women, were in tears. Mr. Sankey's voice is a marvel of sweetness, flexibility, and strength. There is a simplicity about his vocalism, that disarms the criticism that would apply to it any of the rules of art. It has a charm purely its own, which attracts and holds one with a power that is gentle but irresistible."

In Philadelphia he had the assistance of a choir of five hundred singers under the leadership of Prof. Fischer, and rendered the same effective assistance as before to Mr. Moody in his evangelical mission. His songs sunk into the hearts of the people, so that such questions as "Did you hear the 'Ninety and Nine'?" "Isn't his singing better than a sermon?" "Wasn't that hymn 'Nothing but Leaves' impressive?" as well as the singing of the songs themselves, were frequently heard along the streets of the city.

The Rev. Dr. Sheppard said, "The first song I heard Mr. Sankey sing was, 'Jesus of Nazareth passeth by;' and it was the most eloquent sermon I ever heard. It spoke of the opportunity present, soon to pass, and actually past. It was most impressing and powerful."

At a convention held near the close of his labors in Philadelphia, Mr. Sankey said, in respect to church music, — and his words are worthy of attention,

"It should be conducted by a good large choir of Christian singers, who should encourage the congregation to join heartily with them in the songs of Zion, instead of monopolizing the service themselves. I would have the singers and the organ in front of the congregation, near the minister; and would insist on deportment by the singers in keeping with the services of the house of God. The conduct of the choir during the service will have very much to do with the success of the preaching. Instead of whispering, writing notes, passing books, and the like, the choir should give the closest attention to all the services, especially to the preaching of the word. There should be the most intimate relation between the leader of the singing and the pastor. Old familiar hymns and tunes should be used, and now and then a Sunday-school song; so that the children may feel that they have a part in the prayer-meeting, as well as in the Sunday school. All should try to understand the sentiment of the hymn or sacred song, and enter into it with heart and voice, in a prayerful frame of mind, silently asking God to bless the song, to every soul."

During the meeting Mr. Sankey spoke of the pleasure he had received in hearing his songs sung in the capital of Switzerland, which he visited before returning to America, — and also on the railways in France, — adding that by God's grace he would keep on singing and encourage others to sing those sweet stories of Jesus and his love.

In respect to church psalmody, Mr. Sankey at another time said that music occupied a very prominent place in the Lord's work; and that the choirs in the churches should consist of Christian people, and be led by a Christian chorister.

If he could not find sufficient members among the congregation, he would go into the Sunday schools, where they would generally find the gospel songs sung more heartily than anywhere else.

The ministers, also, should encourage the singers. Mr. Spurgeon, in London, never gives out a hymn without telling the people just how he would like it sung; and the result is that the whole assemblage of people partake of his earnestness, and sing it with spirit.

Mr. Sankey hoped that he should be pardoned if he said that ministers did not make as much of the singing as they could. The singing, he thought, should be prayed for as much as the preaching. It has been an important part in the services in all ages. The choir should not be away in the back gallery. The singers should be near the minister, alongside the platform, so that he could be in accord with them. In churches there should not be two parties, one at one end, another at the opposite end of the church.

He did not think there should be any people in the choir whose department would grieve the children of God.

Mr. Sankey said he once heard a bishop preach, and during the whole service a young lady, a member of the choir, kept talking and writing notes to a young gentleman, which behavior so distracted his (Mr. Sankey's) attention that he did not know actually what the bishop was talking about.

The man, he said, who leads, should go into the Sunday school and into the prayer-meetings. If he cannot do this, he will exercise no very marked influence for good in the choir. In the Sunday school Mr. Sankey would have a little organ.

He admired the large, the noble instrument; but people did not sing so well with it as with the small one. When a large organ is being played, it drowns the voices, and people just sit and listen without singing. A little organ will only give the singers the key-note. We do not, in fact, need any instrumental music in the house of God: we only want the key-note.

Then he would insist that the organist should play softly. He had a pretty strong voice, but the strength of some of the organs would effectually drown his voice.

If there are any evangelistic services to be held in your midst, every minister, when he sends in lists of people for our choirs, should send in the very best. When the choir meets, let the exercises be commenced and closed with prayer. He believed four-fifths of the traditional trouble in choirs is because of the ungodly people composing them.

He would not have a man get up and flourish a book or stick in leading. When practicing, of course it might be admissible; but, when we come to worship God; the less the display the better.

Mr. Sankey concluded by touching upon the necessity of a correct pronunciation.

"Owing to a careless reading, people do not understand the words as they are sung; consequently they cannot take up the hymn and sing in unison with the choir. If the reading were better, there would be a great deal more interest manifested by the congregation."

At the Hippodrome in New York City, Mr. Sankey afforded Mr. Moody essential aid in conducting the long-extended services of the revival, adding to the interest of the meetings not unfrequently, by a pertinent illustration or a story, as well as by his soul-moving songs. "His singing," said one of the religious journals, "contributed much to the inspiration which animated the services, and helped to draw the vast crowds which felt their influence. Every hymn was a gospel message; and the tunes seemed not only to be made on purpose for the hymns, but the expression given to their spirit, and the articulation given to the words, were scarcely less than perfect."

At the conclusion of his labors here he said in a large meeting, "I feel in my heart to-night a sad minor note sounding there, one of sadness and regret that the meetings which have been so blessed are so soon, so far as we are concerned, to pass away; this is a sad thought and note in the song of my heart to-night: yet still there is a louder note, one of a joyful tone, telling me we shall meet again. I desire to say before giving way to others, that in all our work, both in this and other countries, we have never had more hearty, warm, and efficient help than we have had in New York in all the departments of our labor. We feel that each one, in whatever secluded place, has done his duty; and my heart goes out to each of you with a hearty 'God bless You!'"

After the close of this campaign, Mr. Sankey's health became somewhat impaired: yet feeling the need of new hymns and music, he engaged zealously with his friend Mr. P. P. Bliss in the preparation of "Gospel Hymns No. 2," which contains twelve of his own tunes, together with some by Messrs. Bliss, Doane, Root, Vail, Perkins, Lowry, Phillips, Main, Bradbury, and others, and which is now used at the Tabernacle in Boston.

In the midst of his arduous labors in the city of Chicago, Mr. Sankey was suddenly called to mourn the death of Mr. and Mrs. Bliss, with whom he had been so long associated in the sweet service of song. The assurance only, that through Christ they should beyond the river sing a sweeter strain in company, could assuage his grief.

At the opening of the Tabernacle for the renowned evangelists in Boston, on the 28th of January, 1877, the expectation in regard to the singing of Mr. Sankey was very great; as this city is noted for its knowledge and its love of music. Will Mr. Sankey's simple melodies, his unartistic style of singing, satisfy the public taste? Will the efforts of the Western vocalist with his melodeon be appreciated? The desire to listen to his songs was perhaps as strong as that of hearing the distinguished preacher.

The services opened, and the minstrel who had charmed so many audiences, both in the Old World and the New, came in and modestly took his seat beside his little instrument on the platform. The hymn commencing, "There were ninety and nine that safely lay," being then announced, he arose, and in a clear, distinct voice made the following supplication for a blessing upon sacred song:—

"Our heavenly Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus we come to thee at this moment, asking that thy blessing may rest upon the singing that has already been done, and shall be done, in this great Tabernacle. Bless, we pray thee, the message of thy love as found in these songs. And we pray, our Father, that thou wouldst bless the singers who have just come here, and will come day after day, to lift up the voice of praise unto thee. And as in days of old, when singers were wont to make a joyful noise unto the Lord, do thou meet with thy people in this temple dedicated to thy service. And, our Father, shall we not ask that ere long we may even see the prodigals being brought home by the Good Shepherd himself; having wandered far away from thee, they will hear that ringing voice of thine, and say, 'I will arise and go to my Father.' Lord Jesus, bless us now in all that we shall do here, and we will give thee the praise for evermore. Amen."

He then in tones of remarkable sweetness sung the celebrated song, enchaining the attention of the great assemblage, and convincing all, that, though he might not satisfy the high demands of art, he had the power to send his voice into the soul, and touch the secret chords of its most profound devotion. This indeed is something higher than art, and captivates when art is powerless. It is not so much by the force, as by the peculiar *timbre*, the searching quality of his voice, that Mr. Sankey produces such effect. Many of his songs, as rendered by very accomplished vocalists, are powerless to move the heart. People hear them thus performed in the social circle, and wonder how and why they ever make such marked impressions. The reason may be that Mr. Sankey sends by an intense sympathy, and by tones peculiarly his own, the sentiment of the song into the hearer's soul. His objective point is the conversion or the sanctification of that soul; the listener then, forgetting the singer and the song, turns his thought inward to himself, and the truth as it is in Jesus wakens the emotions. To know the power of Mr. Sankey's songs, the only sure way is to hear him. He may well be called the Dempster of sacred song. His voice, especially in the middle notes, has a peculiar

sympathetic sweetness that steals into the heart, and mysteriously unlocks the fountain of tears. He reveals, as none others can, the sentiment of his hymn, and, enunciating every word and syllable with remarkable distinctness, makes himself heard with ease in the remotest parts of the very largest audience-chamber. He has also the tact of adapting every song to the subject-matter of the speaker, or to the peculiar mood of the congregation, so as to produce the best effect. Sometimes a doubt arises whether he or Mr. Moody draws the greater number to the Tabernacle: certain it is, that neither would succeed so well alone. Persons of a delicate, sensitive, and emotional temperament would undoubtedly prefer the singer; those who love to hear plain truths enunciated fearlessly would prefer the preacher: yet, as the public is made up of both these classes, it finds that in the union of the two evangelists its spiritual demands are satisfied.

"Mr. Moody," says The Inter-Ocean, "startles us and arouses us, while Mr. Sankey soothes and comforts. Mr. Moody, earnest as he is, succeeds without the grace of voice and manner: Mr. Sankey, earnest as he is, succeeds because of grace in voice and manner. He is well fitted to be Mr. Moody's companion, and those who hear him do not wonder at his continued success in this peculiar field."

"Mr. Sankey," says Mrs. Barbour truthfully as well as beautifully, "sings with the conviction that souls are receiving Jesus between one note and the next. The stillness is overawing; some of the lines are more spoken than sung. The hymns are equally used for awakening, and none more so than 'Jesus of Nazareth passeth by.' When you hear 'The Ninety and Nine' sung, you know of a truth that down in this corner, up in that gallery, behind that pillar which hides the singer's face from the listener, the hand of Jesus has been finding this and that and yonder lost one, to place them in his fold. A certain class of hearers come to the services solely to hear Mr. Sankey, and the song throws the Lord's net around them."

Sustained by the efficient choir of Dr. Tourjée, this gifted singer, criticize him as we may, continues to perform admirably his part in the varied exercises of the Tabernacle. The great congregation listens with ever-fresh delight to his well-rendered songs, "I need Thee every Hour," "Hallelujah, 'tis done," "Where are the Nine?" "Hold the Fort, for I am coming," "Waiting and Watching," "Have You on the Lord believed?" "Go bury thy Sorrow," "Pull for the Shore," and others of a world-wide reputation, and always joins with united and exultant voices in the chorus.

Mr. Sankey has a pleasing personal appearance. Though not as large as Mr. Moody, he excels him both as to symmetry in form and grace in manner. His hair and eyes are dark; his countenance is open, genial, expressive, and sometimes, when he is engaged in singing, radiant with joy...

Without the force, mental or physical, of his fellow-laborer, Mr. Sankey has more of personal beauty, more of culture, and also of that natural suavity which wins the hearts of all who know him.

May his life be long continued, and his tongue, tuned to still loftier notes of praise, call, by the power of consecrated song, yet mightier throngs of people to rejoice in God their Saviour!

The following lines addressed to him were sent to me by the author for this work:—

"Sing on, minstrel, heavenward bearing;
Music moves the world from sin;
Onward, then, God's truth declaring;
Faith and works are bound to win,—

Bound to win in every contest,
Though the odds be ne'er so strong;
Truth the firmest, hope the fondest,
Cheer thee in thy "gospel song."

Drones can never rise to glory,

Doomed to perish in the strife;
God ordains it, true the story,
'Workers reap the joys of life.'

Sing, then, songs new, sweet, and holy;
Lure the world away from sin;
Lift the burdens from the lowly;
Upward, onward, work and win."
—Robert B. Caverly

[Ira Sankey died in 1908.]

Copied by Stephen Ross for WholesomeWords.org from *The Lives of the Eminent American Evangelists Dwight Lyman Moody and Ira David Sankey...* by Elias Nason. Boston: B. B. Russell, 1877.

More Information on [Ira D. Sankey](#)