



## The Elias Library of Hymnology at Westminster College, Cambridge

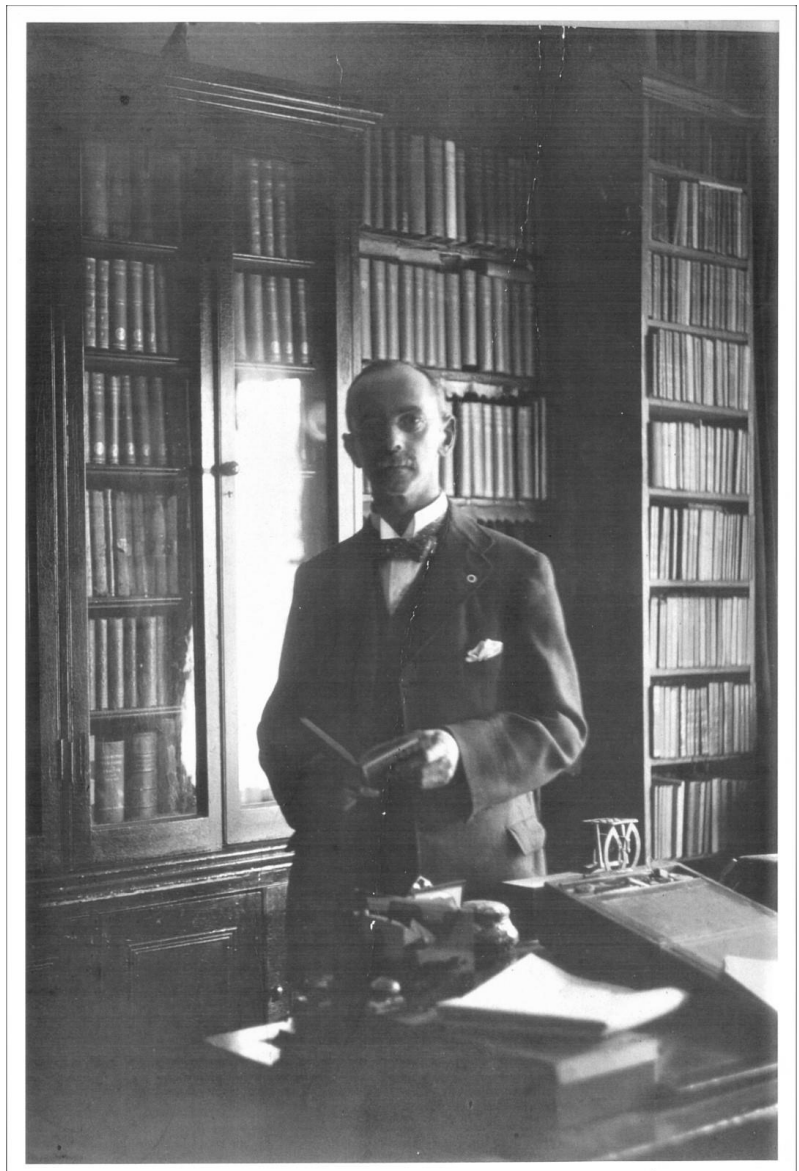
A library of hymnbooks amassed by a lifelong collector, the Elias Library of Hymnology – comprising nearly 3,000 books – was bequeathed to the College in 1942. So who was Elias?

Edward Alfred Elias was born into a Presbyterian family in Liverpool in late 1875 or 1876.<sup>i</sup> His father was William Owen Elias (1850-1917), a builder, who was originally from Wales.<sup>ii</sup> and his mother was Martha (1853-1933); the 1881-1901 censuses show Edward and his younger brothers and sisters – Frank, Charles, Jessie, and Hilda – growing up in Liverpool: in Everton in 1881, in Walton in 1891, and then from the 1901 census onwards, in West Kirby.

When the family moved to West Kirby, it was an affluent area of the Wirral; in the 1870s, when Elias was born, it enjoyed a reputation as a health resort. The Presbyterian church in West Kirby was originally created to meet the needs of a holidaying population – in fact, it was initially envisaged that services would only be held in the summer – but West Kirby grew throughout the 1880s and 1890s, and the church grew with it.<sup>iii</sup> By the time Elias would have attended the church in West Kirby, the minister was Rev. Patrick Miller Kirkland, who himself wrote many hymns: perhaps his most famous is ‘Jesu, Lord, Redeemer’.<sup>iv</sup>

Edward’s brothers Charles (c.1880-1948) and Frank (1878-1949) were involved in the Church: Charles was a member of the Management Committee, and Secretary for the Men’s Total Temperance Association;<sup>v</sup> Frank was on the Board of Management for St George’s Presbyterian Church in Felixstowe, where he lived with his wife Edith after the First World War.<sup>vi</sup>

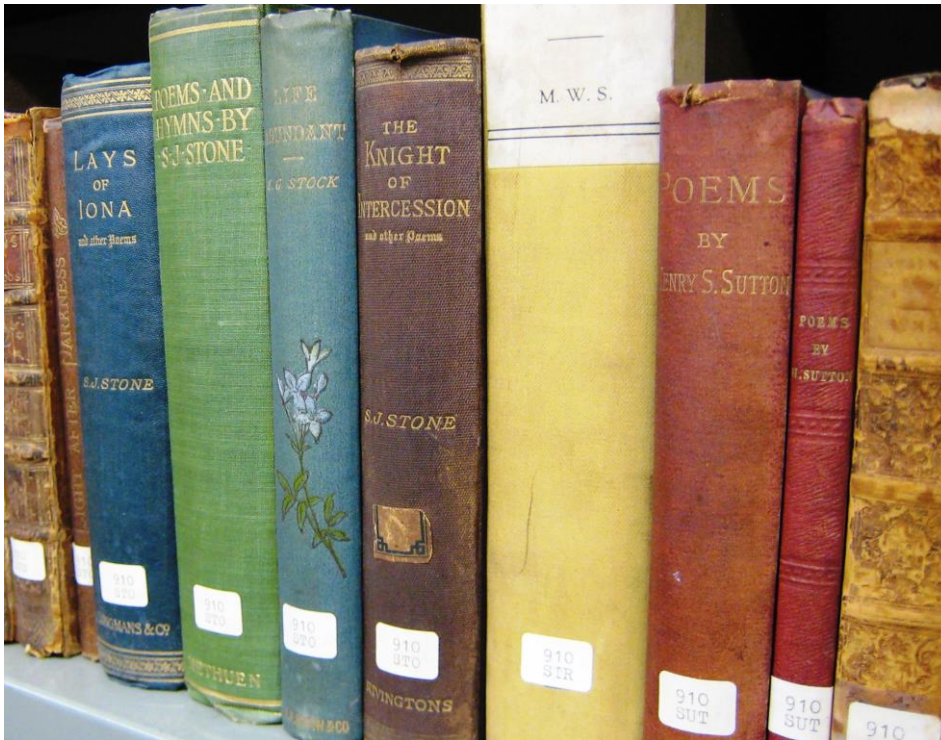
Edward Elias wasn’t a minister of the Church, or an Elder; he isn’t mentioned in any of the Synod or Presbytery records, or in any books about the church in West Kirby. He was, however, described by his brother as “an ardent Presbyterian”. And he was a keen collector of hymnbooks, born at the very end of a time of change for hymns and music within Presbyterian worship – which is reflected in his collection.



Edward Alfred Elias (c.1875-1941), by an unknown photographer

The roots of the nineteenth-century Presbyterian churches, and especially the Scottish Churches, lie in a tradition in which the congregation did not sing hymns. Instead, they sang metrical psalms or scriptures, led by a Precentor, without musical accompaniment.

When, in 1836, the Presbyterians in England decided to form an English Presbyterian Church of their own – ‘in connection with the Church of Scotland’<sup>vii</sup> but independent of it – people took the opportunity to consider moving in different directions with music and singing in worship. Initially, not everyone in the new Church wanted hymns to be sung – and there was a concurrent debate about whether organs should be used to lead singing in worship, too.<sup>viii</sup>



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But by 1857, enough people were in favour of congregational singing that the new Church published a hymnbook called *Paraphrases and Hymns*, containing hymns by Wesley, Watts, and the authors which Erik Routley calls “all those authors of the Calvinistic or near-Calvinistic tradition who have any claim to greatness”;<sup>ix</sup> Doddridge, Cowper, Newton, Conder, Montgomery, Kelly, and Toplady. A new, enlarged hymnbook

called *Psalms and Hymns for Divine Worship*, was issued in 1867; and at the same time, organs, which had been forbidden since the 1850s, began to be accepted as a way of facilitating singing and worship.

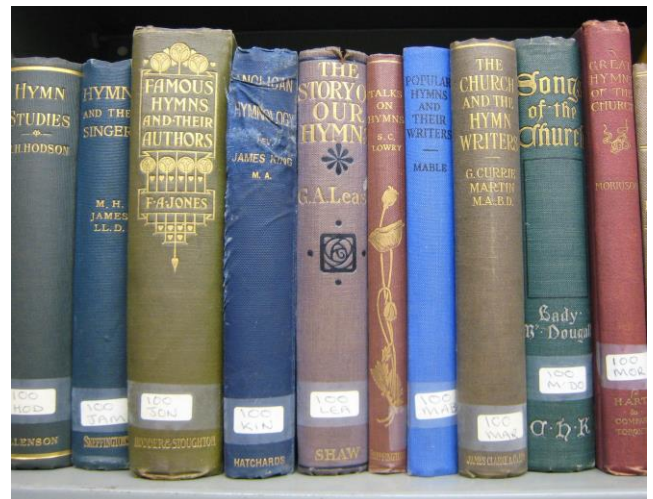
The Elias Library reflects both the older tradition of psalmody, and this new tradition of hymns among English Presbyterians – it includes copies of both these hymnbooks, as well as the 1884 hymnbook for the Presbyterian Church of England *Church Praise*. Incidentally, this 1884 volume illustrates how this was a lifetime’s collection: Elias added the date he acquired each book inside the front cover, and one copy of *Church Praise* is inscribed on the flyleaf “Edward Alfred Elias, on his fifteenth birthday from his mother. Oct 27<sup>th</sup> 1890”.

**But the collection is not limited just to Presbyterian hymnbooks! As well as works on hymnology and hymnists, church music, and religious poetry, there are hymnbooks from a range of Christian denominations.** There is particular focus on the Presbyterian tradition, but there are also hymnbooks from the Anglican, Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, Unitarian, and Moravian traditions. There are hymnbooks from specific organisations, including schools, missions, and Temperance Associations. There are collections of hymns arranged by festival (‘Christmas Hymns’), by theme (‘For The Sick’), by country (‘Hymns of America’); and there are hymn books in other languages, especially Welsh, French and German.

The Library also includes some of the articles Elias himself wrote between 1903-1907 about the development of Nonconformist hymns. In a letter to the College in December 1941, his brother Frank describes Edward Elias as “a student of history” and as “one of the greatest authorities [on hymnology] in the North of England”.<sup>x</sup> and it’s interesting to see how Elias himself describes the developments of hymnody, and who he selects as the “great names”.

When Edward Elias died in 1941, and his Library was offered to the College, a letter was sent to the Principal, Reverend WAL Elmslie. Frank Elias, Edward’s brother, and executor of the will, says “My late brother would have liked to feel that he had provided Westminster with a library to which both your own students and hymnologists in or visiting Cambridge could resort”.<sup>xi</sup> And this is the invitation the College still extends: the Elias Library is open to all staff, students, and guests of Westminster College and the Cambridge Theological Federation, and all ministers and members of the United Reformed Church. And any others who would like to use the collection are also welcome to contact the College Archivist to arrange access, on [hw374@westminster.cam.ac.uk](mailto:hw374@westminster.cam.ac.uk) .

The collection is listed on the Cambridge University Library catalogue, iDiscover, which is accessible online at <https://www.idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/>.



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Helen Weller, Archivist  
Autumn 2022

<sup>i</sup> Civil registration records say E. A. Elias was born in the last quarter of 1875, the census returns say 1876.

<sup>ii</sup> In addition to census records, a photograph of E. A. Elias in the collection includes a note on the reverse saying he is the ‘eldest son of William Owen Elias, Welsh builder, of Liverpool’.

<sup>iii</sup> Alberta Doodson, *The Presbyterians In Liverpool* (London: URC, 2004) p. 190.

<sup>iv</sup> Rev. Patrick Miller Kirkland (1857-1943) was minister at West Kirby 1887-1927. *Jesu, Lord, Redeemer*, is included in the Church Hymnary (revised ed and 3<sup>rd</sup> edition). See Doodson, pp.180-191.

<sup>v</sup> *These Five and Twenty Years: a History of West Kirby United Reformed Church* (1907, reprinted 2012), online at <https://www.wkurc.org.uk/uploads/3/2/5/9/3259149/these-five-and-twenty-years.pdf>.

<sup>vi</sup> For further information about Frank Elias, see Steve Russell’s fascinating article in *The East Anglian Daily Telegraph*, “First World War: What Suffolk Really Ought To Know About Frank Elias”, published 23 June 2014, updated 2020. Online at [http://www.eadt.co.uk/ea-life/first-world-war-why-suffolk-really-ought-to-know-about-frank-elias\\_1\\_3652746](http://www.eadt.co.uk/ea-life/first-world-war-why-suffolk-really-ought-to-know-about-frank-elias_1_3652746)

<sup>vii</sup> This title, in use in the 1830s, was changed in 1844 to the Presbyterian Church in England.

<sup>viii</sup> The Synod of 1856 forbade the use of organs in churches, but the ban was lifted in the 1870s and, according to Doodson, “very soon after organs were allowed, it was felt that an organ was essential in every church”. Doodson, p. 349.

<sup>ix</sup> Erik Routley, *I’ll Praise My Maker* (London: Independent Press, 1951), p. 14.

<sup>x</sup> Letter from Frank Elias to Principal WAL Elmslie, 3 Dec 1941. WL7/7 Elias Library Correspondence.

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