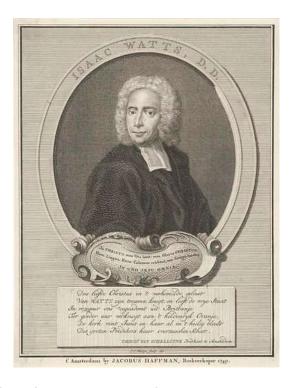


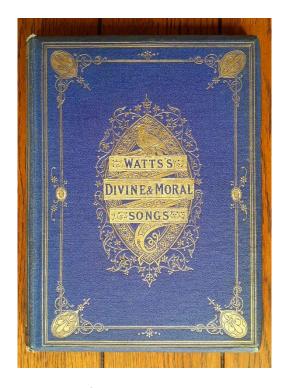
## Isaac Watts and the Little Busy Bee – pictures for Victorian children

This year marks the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Isaac Watts (1674-1748), Congregational minister, theologian, and hymn writer. He wrote over 750 hymns, and the third of his four hymn books, called *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, was first published in 1715.

Watts was one of the first hymn writers to consider children as a distinct audience, and *Divine* Songs (also known as Songs Divine and Moral) uses simple language, everyday imagery, and clear explanations of the underlying moral point.

Watts clarifies in the Introduction what his purpose is in *Divine Songs* – "to give the minds of children a relish for virtue and religion". He states he used verse to make his message entertaining, memorable, and pleasant; but that he wanted to frame each song in language at "the level of a child's understanding, and yet […] above contempt" and for "universal use".





One of the best known is Song XX 'Against Idleness and Mischief', which begins 'How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour'. Bees have long been a symbol of hard work and industry, as well as being a familiar sight for children, and Watts uses them as an example of idyllic pastoral busy-ness – "gather[ing] honey all the day from every opening flower" – for children to emulate.

Early editions of *Songs Divine and Moral* contained only text, but throughout the reign of Queen Victoria, societal perceptions of children and childhood were changing. Illustrated works for children were produced more widely, and the little busy bee began to be depicted in different editions to further engage children's interest.

We looked at four volumes from the Elias Library of Hymnology which show how different artists illustrated Isaac Watts's little busy bee across the nineteenth century – in hives and in flowers; with and without children and grown-ups; by a range of engravers and artists.



This 1837 edition of Songs, Divine and Moral is illustrated by Ebeneezer Landells (1808-1860), who shows a supervising adult and the bees with their hive. A wood engraver from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Landells moved to London in 1829, and worked extensively with the Illustrated London News from its inception in 1842. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1837)



This 1848 illustration was drawn by Charles West Cope (1811-1898), professor of painting at the Royal Academy, who painted the frescoes in the House of Lords – and engraved by John Thompson (1785-1866) best known for his work on *History of British Birds*, by William Yarrell in 1843. (London: John Van Voorst, 1848)



An 1863 illustration by James Davis Cooper (1823-1904), an English engraver active in the 1860s and 1870s, is the only one not to show a hive. He also engraved the illustrations for Mrs Barbaud's Hymns In Prose For Children, and in the 1863 preface, wrote that illustrations were "a matter of some importance with the young". (London: Sampson Low, Son & Marston, 1866)



And in this 1896 edition, Georgina (Georgie)
Evelyn Cave Gaskin (1866-1934), shows a
child alone with the hive. A jewellery
designer and illustrator who studied at the
Birmingham School of Art, she and her
husband worked in an Arts & Crafts style
and created illustrations, jewellery, and
enamelwork, individually and together.
(London: Elkin Mathews, [1896])

The original books are currently on display in the library at Westminster College, Cambridge. Helen Weller, Archivist – Autumn 2024