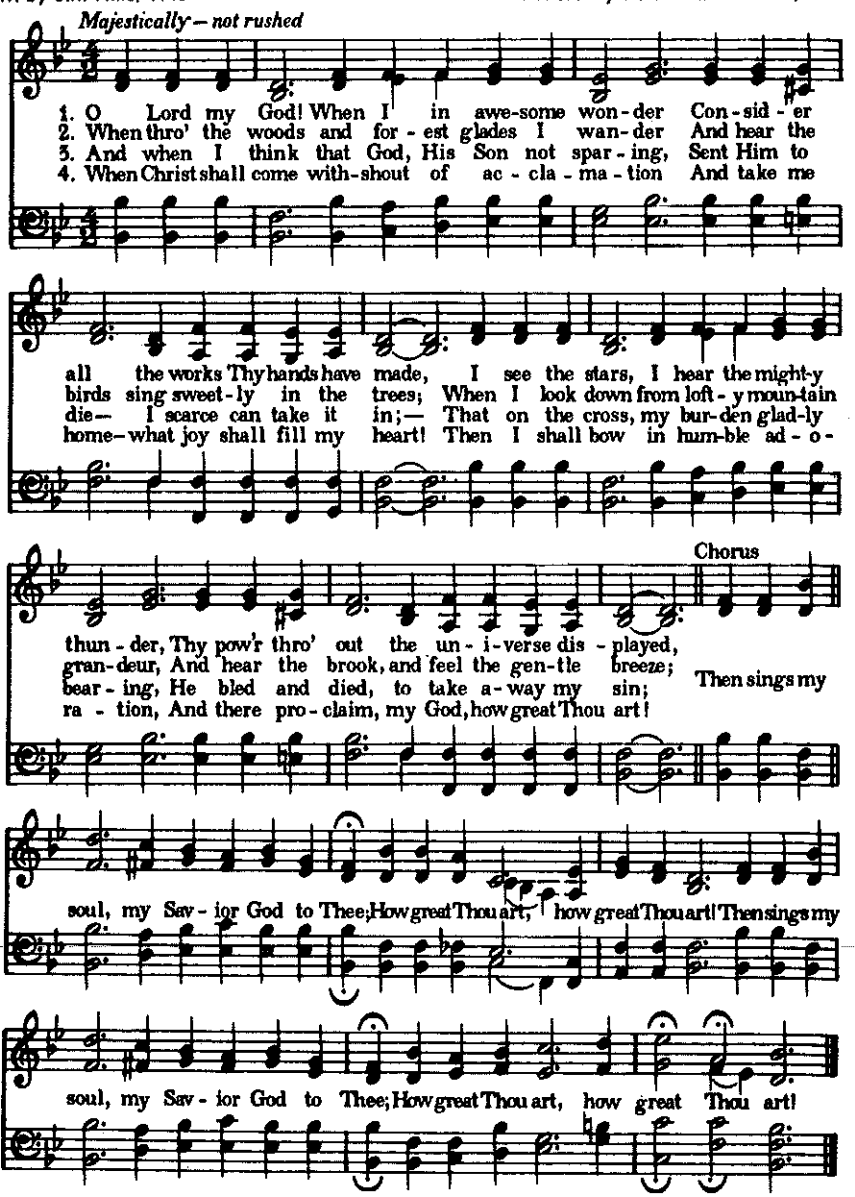
How Great Thou Art

Carl Boberg
Tr. by S.K. Hine, 1948

Swedish Melody
Revised by Rev. Jean Stanescht, 1929

Majestically – not rushed



© Copyright 1953, 1955 by Manna Music, Inc. This arrangement © Copyright 1972 by Alfred B. Smith. Assigned 1978 to Manna Music, Inc., 2111 Kenmere Ave., Burbank, CA 91504. Used by permission.

HOW GREAT THOU ART

I can say without fear of argument that this song has captured the hearts of Christians more than any other song in our generation.

I am indebted to Mr. Stewart K. Hine, who was used of God to literally give this song to the world, for the thrilling story leading to its writing and development.

"How Great Thou Art" in its original form came from Sweden in 1885, almost 100 years ago. It was a poem written by Carl Boberg, a 26-year-old preacher in the summer of 1885 under the title "O Store Gud" which is translated "O Great God." It was a warm summer day. Carl and some of his friends had gone to a meeting some 2 miles from home. On the way back they were caught in a thunder storm. As the storm broke, the lightning flashed, the thunder rolled, and the winds swept across the fields; and then, as quickly as it came, it was all over. The sun again came out and with it appeared a rainbow. Then, as the rainbow disappeared and the sun began to sink in the west in the thrill of the evening, from a distance could be heard the song of the thrush and the church tower sounding the tolling of the bell memorializing a funeral that had been held that afternoon. The very atmosphere, the beauty of the surroundings, and the sound of the bell — all combined to draw from the heart and mind of the young preacher a poem, the subject of which after many translations in many lands and after many years would become known as "How Great Thou Art."

Each translation helped enrich the poem as each country added its own particular "flavor," but it was an English missionary by the name of Stuart K. Hine who worked in the Western Ukraine and later in Sub-Carpathian Russia, who gave us the inspiring original English words as we know them today. As one looks back, one can't help but see the hand of God sending Hine to the particular area in which he worked, for he later said, "God put me amid unforgettable experiences in the Carpathian Mountains." These experiences, plus the grandeur and beauty of his surroundings, did much to flood Hine with the feeling of awe and wonder at so great a God. This would eventually lead him to describe all of this in his own ways and words.

In giving his account of events leading to the writing, Hine recalls the first Carpathian Mountain Village to which he climbed. He stood in the street, sang a Gospel hymn, and read aloud John, chapter three. But a storm was gathering and soon he had taken shelter in the home of a friendly schoolmaster who had been listening. "Awe-inspiring was 'the mighty thunder' echoing through the mountains" was the way he described the experience which would be the seed-thought for his first stanza.

Traveling on, Hine crossed the mountain frontier into Romania. There in the Bukovina (the land of the beech tree) he found believers young and old alike. Together "through woods and forest glades" they wandered and "heard the birds sing sweetly in the trees." To the accompaniment of mandolins and guitars, they too burst into song singing the Russian version of "How Great Thou Art." Thus inspired by the awesome wonder of the surroundings, "the works Thy hands have made," the beautiful melody and the earlier mountain experience with it's "mighty thunder," there burst forth into life from the heart and mind of missionary Hine, the first two stanzas:

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy pow'r throu' out the universe displayed.

When thro' the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze, ...

As Hine continued his work of preaching and distributing Gospels in village after village and had traveled some 125 miles, he had an experience which would give life to verse 3. He met a man and his wife who had owned a Bible for almost 20 years (it had been left by a fleeing Russian soldier) but they could not read it. The very year that Hine met them, the wife had taken the Bible and had made up her mind she would learn to read it. Persevering day by day she began to learn to read it, and in turn began to read it to the villagers who in wonder listened as she slowly and

haltingly read the most wonderful story of the crucifixion. Tears began to flow as men and women fell to their knees crying to God. It was at that precise time that Stuart K. Hine came upon the scene and witnessed the amazing happening — people seeing the revelation of God's love at Calvary for the first time. It was then that he conceived stanza three.

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die — I scarce can take it in;
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died, to take away my sin.

It was some 10 years later (1948) that he conceived the fourth stanza. God used the years in between to impress upon Hine's heart the importance of the words "home" and "heaven" as he worked among the many World War II refugees in Britain. The first question they would ask was, "When are we going home?" At such a time, what better message could he give to them but of the One who had gone to prepare a better home and who had promised to come someday to take His children home with Him forever to a place called Heaven. And so from his heart and these experiences there came the fourth stanza.

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home — what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,
And there proclaim, My God, how great Thou art!

Carl Boberg's poem had traveled long and far but at last it had reached a place in its transformation where it would inspire and bless the English speaking church more than any other song had since the days of the Wesleys. All because of a dedicated missionary servant of God named Stuart K. Hine.

All the facts of this story were taken from a much fuller account by the author Mr. Stuart K. Hine. It is called The Story of How Great Thou Art *and is obtainable by writing Stuart K. Hine, Carpathia, Coast Road, Berrow, Burnham-on-the-Sea, Somerset, England, TA8. A copy will be sent postpaid for $2.00 (for checks, 75¢ bank charges must be added).*