

THOU WHO WAST RICH BEYOND ALL SPLENDOR

traditional French carol

arranged by Douglas Mears

text by Frank Houghton

Instrumentation

Flute

Oboe

English Horn

2 Clarinets in B^b

Bassoon

2 Horns in F

Timpani

Percussion

mark tree, celeste, suspended cymbal, chimes

Harp

SATB Choir

Violin I

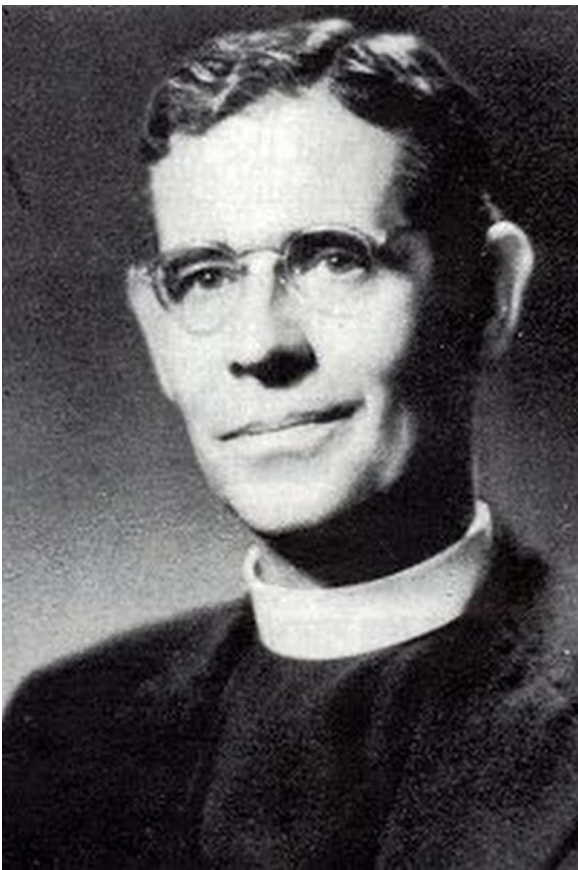
Violin II

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

Notes on the Text



The author of “Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor,” Frank Houghton (1894–1972), was an evangelical Anglican bishop and longtime director of China Inland Mission, the ministry founded by the missionary pioneer Hudson Taylor. Houghton was also a hymn writer and is most famous for this stirring Christmas carol.

Chip Stam, the late director of the Institute for Christian Worship at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, tells of the history behind the hymn.

Serving as Editorial Secretary for the China Inland Mission, Frank Houghton made a trip to China in 1934 to see first-hand the progress of the work. This hymn was written at a particularly difficult time in the history of the missions to China. Missionaries had been captured by the communist Red Army and released in poor health after over a year of suffering. Others had been captured, never to be heard from again. In 1934 the young missionaries John and Betty Stam (my great aunt and uncle) were captured in Anhwei and beheaded. The news of these sorrows had reached the mission’s headquarters in Shanghai. Though this was a very dangerous time for both the Chinese Christians and the foreign missionaries, Frank Houghton decided he needed to begin a tour through the country to visit various missionary outposts. While traveling over the mountains of Szechwan, the powerful and comforting words of 2 Corinthians 8:9, “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor,” were transformed into this beautiful Christmas hymn.

From the first word until the last, this text offers a breathtaking portrayal of the Christ of Christmas. Each stanza explores a different aspect of the work of our Lord: his humiliation, incarnation, and exaltation. In his humiliation, the Son of God exchanged a throne for a manger, celestial courts for a stable floor, and riches for poverty (Phil. 2:5–8). In his incarnation, the Son of God became a man in order to redeem his people from their sins (cf. Matt. 1:21–23; John 1:1, 14). In his exaltation, Christ is the object of our love and adoration (Phil. 2:9–11).

This beloved carol reminds us that the only fitting response to the Christ of Christmas is worship. Christmas is about a gift beyond all splendor, all praising, all telling. One cannot fathom how magnificent this gift is. For Christmas is about the greatest, and costliest, gift of all—the gift of Christ himself. As the Apostle Paul states, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

*Dr. John Tweeddale
Academic Dean and Professor of Theology
Reformation Bible College.*

This musical setting by Douglas Mears of the 17th-century French Christmas carol also includes an anonymous alternate text, “Quelle est cette odeur agréable?”, translated into English (“*Whence is that goodly fragrance flowing?*”) by the British academic and Latin poet Allen Beville Ramsay (1872–1955).