

# A Child Is Born

based on an “Air” by Ernest John Moeran

arranged for SATB Choir and Strings (or Organ)

by Douglas Mears

## Notes

The melody of this new carol and its accompaniment is based on the second movement of Ernest John Smeed Moeran’s *Serenade in G*, entitled “Air.” Known as Jack to his closest friends, Moeran (31 December 1894 – 1 December 1950) was a British composer whose work was strongly influenced by English and Irish folk music, of which he was an assiduous collector. The son of a clergyman, Moeran studied at the Royal College of Music under Charles Villiers Stanford. His studies there were curtailed by the start of World War I, when he joined the Army as a motorcycle messenger. In May 1917, he was wounded in the head by shrapnel fragments that were too close to the brain to remove; a steel plate was placed in his skull, and he was plagued by medical problems for the rest of his life. After the war, he was a pupil of John Ireland and quickly established a reputation as a composer of promise with a number of well-received works. From 1925 to 1928, he shared a cottage with the composer Peter Warlock; the bohemian lifestyle and heavy drinking during this period interrupted his creativity for a while and sowed the seeds of the alcoholism that would blight his later life. He resumed composing in the 1930s and re-established his reputation with a series of major works, including the *Serenade in G*, a work that has a good deal in common with Warlock’s *Capriol Suite* in its orchestral dress. Both use dance forms from a previous age and transform them with new colors and harmonic touches. In 1945, Moeran married the cellist Peers Coetmore, and for her, he composed several works for the cello. The marriage was not destined to last, however, and Moeran’s final years were lonely. He died on December 1, 1950, having fallen into the river Kenmare after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage. He was buried in Kenmare, where his tombstone reads, “He lies in the mountain country he loved so well.” Composer, music critic, and musicologist Anthony Payne declared that “Moeran occupied a minor place in the music of his time, but his meticulously polished and ready technique is unsurpassed among his British contemporaries.”

The text of this carol, “A Child Is Born,” has been adapted from a 14th-century Benedictine processional entitled “Puer Natus in Bethlehem,” formerly belonging to the monastery of St. Georg near Hamburg, Germany. The Latin text was translated into English by Richard Frederick Littledale, born in Dublin in 1833, the son of John Richard Littledale, a town merchant. Richard Littledale entered Trinity College, Dublin, as a foundation scholar, graduated with a bachelor’s degree in classics, a Master of Divinity in 1858, and then a bachelor’s and doctorate in civil law at Oxford in 1862. From 1856 to 1857, he was the curate of St. Matthew in Thorpe Hamlet, Norfolk, and from 1857 to 1861, he was the curate of St. Mary the Virgin in Soho, London. For the remainder of his life, he suffered from chronic illness and spent most of his time writing books and articles for periodicals, as well as translating ancient hymn texts.

Douglas Mears has set this beloved, ageless Christmas text with new choral parts, accompanied by Moeran’s tender and heartfelt “Air” for string orchestra.

## Text

A child is born this day in Bethlehem.  
Now sing high and sing low: Rejoice Jerusalem.  
Alleluia! A child is born in Bethlehem.  
Rejoice! Sing alleluia!

To thee, Lord, be glory paid. Sing alleluia!  
Thou Son of Mary, mother-maid: sing alleluia!  
To the holy Trinity, give praise:  
with *Deo gracias* always.  
Rejoice! Sing alleluia!