

"What Child Is This" History

This melancholic melody that *"What Child Is This?"* is set to is a famous old English tune called *"Greensleeves."* It was a ballad of lost love and tales saying it was composed by King Henry VIII for Anne Boleyn are not true. It was an Italian form that came to England in the Elizabethan period. Two different printers were given a license for *"Greensleeves"* in 1580.

Reference to the song was in Shakespeare's play, *"The Merry Wives of Windsor,"* indicating it was a popular tune in the 1600's. The original song was far from religious so it is, with irony, this tune was popularized in the form of a Christmas carol.

William Chatterton Dix was born June 14, 1837 Bristol, England. His father wanted him to become a surgeon, following his footsteps. But he had no interest in a medical career and after grammar school moved to Glasgow and became the manager of Maritime Insurance Company.



When he was twenty-nine years old he suffered a near-fatal illness and spent months in bed. It became a period of emotional and spiritual struggle, leaving him in a deep depression, but he kept writing and the song *"What Child Is This"* emerged in 1865 from his longer poem *"The Manger Throne."*

*Like silver lamps a distant shrine,
The stars are sparkling bright
The bells of the city of God ring out,
For the Son of Mary is born to-night.
The gloom is past and the morn at last
Is coming with orient light.*

*Never fell melodies half so sweet
As those which are filling the skies,
And never a palace shone half so fair
As the manger bed where our Saviour lies;
No night in the year is half so dear
As this which has ended our sighs.*

*Now a new Power has come on the earth,
A match for the armies of Hell:
A Child is born who shall conquer the foe*

*And all the spirits of wickedness quell:
For Mary's Son is the Mighty One
Whom the prophets of God foretell.*

*The stars of heaven still shine as at first
They gleamed on this wonderful night;
The bells of the city of God peal out
And the angels' song still rings in the height;
And love still turns where the Godhead burns
Hid in flesh from fleshly sight.*

*Faith sees no longer the stable floor,
The pavement of sapphire is there
The clear light of heaven streams out to the world
And the angels of God are crowding the air,
And heaven and earth, through the spotless birth
Are at peace on this night so fair.*

Some 150 years later, the *"Greensleeves"* melody has been mostly identified with *"What Child Is This?"*

This tune, slowed down, embraces the key of # E minor, and although it is the saddest of keys, joy is proclaimed, when we sing *"This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing."* The first verse is meditative as we are brought to the manger with the child sleeping on Mary's lap. There we kneel with shepherds in awe, imagine this tune sung by angels, and it weaves deep into our souls. The second verse asks "why" he would be lying "in such mean estate." What could it be other than the babe's purpose to plead for salvations of sinners? The last verse returns to the joyful tone.

Prose and poetry for Christ continued to be greatest love of William Dix, and following this passion, he wrote two devotional books for children and scores of hymns, all rich in scriptural truth.

References: *Be Still My Soul* by Randy Peterson, *A Song In My Heart* & *Then Sings My Soul*, by Robert J. Morgan, *101 Hymn Stories* by Kenneth W. Osbeck and the Internet (various searches).