

James Montgomery

1771-1854

Between 1771 and 1776, James Montgomery's parents, Brother and Sister John Montgomery, attempted to set up a church of the Moravian Brethren (see below) at the Braid Close in the Halfway district of the town (later renamed Montgomery Street in his honour). Though there was as yet no church of any kind in Fullarton, their efforts met with little success. In 1776, they moved to Ireland and, shortly afterwards, to Yorkshire. Thus, by the time he was eight, he had lived in Scotland, Ireland and England. He was born at 26 Montgomery St (now demolished).

James Montgomery was greatly esteemed by his contemporaries. He was a journalist and reformer - one of the main campaigners against the practice of using children as chimney-sweepers. He also wrote numerous epitaphs for Sheffield graves, and many hymns, of which thirteen are still in today's hymnary - he was known as 'the Christian poet'. Later he became known as an editor (of the weekly 'Sheffield Iris') and critic. His work and character were praised by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and many others, on both sides of the Atlantic. William Howitt, a contemporary poet and biographer of poets wrote: "Perhaps there are no lyrics in the language that are so truly Christian."

One of his works was 'The World before the Flood'. His 'West Indies' is an impressive anti-slavery document, born from the experiences of his parents, sent as missionaries in 1783 to the West Indies, where they died and were buried.

Aged 70, he re-visited Irvine, and was presented with the freedom of the burgh. When he died in Sheffield in 1854, the cortege and procession took over four hours to pass by.

Possibly the best known of Montgomery's hymns is "Angels from the Realms of Glory", still popular almost 150 years after it was written (and published in the Sheffield 'Iris') in 1816. You will know the tune, and a group of 1st Irvine Girl Guides gave it an unrehearsed 'go' in June 2013 as part of their Culture Badge research.

Montgomery's parents were of the Moravian church - a church which sought not to attract people already in other churches but to attract the non-churchgoers in their midst - the characteristics of the Moravian Church were simplicity, happiness, unobtrusiveness, fellowship and the ideal of service. Artisan and aristocrat were equals within it.