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Johnson Oatman, Jr. Biography

by J.H. Hall from *Biography of Gospel Song and Hymn Writers* (1914)

JOHNSON OATMAN JR., son of Johnson and Rachel Ann Oatman, was born near Medford, N.J., April 21, 1856. His father was an excellent singer, and it always delighted the son to sit by his side and hear him sing the songs of the church. Outside of the usual time spent in the public schools, Mr. Oatman received his education at Herbert's Academy, Vincentown, N.J., and the New Jersey Collegiate Institute, Bordentown, N.J. At the age of nineteen he joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, and a few

years later he was granted a license to preach the Gospel, and still later he was regularly ordained by Bishop Merrill. However, Mr. Oatman only serves as a local preacher.

For many years he was engaged with his father in the mercantile business at Lumberton, N.J., under the firm name of Johnson Oatman & Son. Since the death of his father, he has for the past fifteen years been in the life insurance business, having charge of the business of one of the great companies in Mt. Holly, N.J., where he resides.

While Mr. Oatman does not fill any particular pulpit, yet he daily preaches to a larger congregation than the pastor of any church in the land. For through the medium of sacred song he preaches the Gospel to "all the world, and to every creature." "Let all the people praise the Lord." Mr. Oatman is at the zenith of his years, and at this time he is one of the most prolific and popular gospel hymn writers in the world. He has written over three thousand hymns, and no gospel song book is considered as being complete unless it contains some of his hymns.

He wrote his first song in 1892, which was brought before the people in 1893 by the late [Prof. J.R. Sweney](#), and entitled "I Am Walking with My Saviour." From that time on Mr. Oatman has written and sent forth to bless the world an average of over two hundred songs each year. In a book published in Boston in the early part of his career as a song-writer, he made the following dedication:

Let others sing of rights or wrongs,
Sing anything that pleases;
But while they're singing other songs,
I'll sing a song for Jesus.

In 1894, Professor Sweney wrote the music to one of Mr. Oatman's songs which at once gave him a place in the front ranks among American hymn writers. It is called "When Our Ships Come Sailing Home." It was sung at the great Ocean Grove, N.J., camp-meeting, and the people there went wild over it. The late Bishop C.C. McCabe sang it all over the United States. About the same time [Prof. W.J. Kirkpatrick](#) introduced Mr. Oatman's "Deeper Yet." This song made a way for itself into the hearts of all true worshippers. There is a peculiar depth to it found in very few gospel songs.

Deeper yet, deeper yet, into the crimson flood;
Deeper yet, deeper yet, under the precious blood.

Then followed "Holy, holy, is what the angels sing," brought out by Dr. H.L. Gilmour. This song has only to be heard and its place is sure. But in 1895 appeared the song that has carried the name of Oatman to every clime and land on earth. The late Prof. Geo. C. Hugg wrote the music to "[No, Not One.](#)" It went like wild-fire from the start. Within one year it had been copied into thirty-five books and took a place among the immortal songs of the religious world. The late Bishop Isaac W. Joyce had the song translated into Chinese and Japanese. During the war in South Africa the *Christian Herald* of New York had a full-page picture of the Boer refugees on the border of India engaged in worship, singing this popular song:

Jesus knows all about our struggles,
He will guide till the day is done;
There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus,
No, not one! No, not one!

Many fine songs are only appropriate for certain occasions, but "No, Not One" can be sung at any time, place, or occasion.

In [1898] the late Prof. J.H. Entwisle introduced "[Higher Ground.](#)" The music was written by [Mr. Chas. H. Gabriel](#), author of "The Glory Song." This song at once took high rank among the holiness people, and secured a lasting place in American hymnology. Nothing can bring forth more shouts at a camp-meeting of "Glory" and "Hallelujah" than the singing of "Higher Ground":

Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith, on heaven's table-land,
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

But it remained for [Prof. E.O. Excell](#) to bring out in 1897 what, in the opinion of most critics, is said to be Mr. Oatman's masterpiece. "[Count Your Blessings.](#)" like "No, Not One," has gone all over the world. Like a beam of sunlight it has brightened up the dark places of earth. Perhaps no

American hymn was ever received with such enthusiasm in England as “Count Your Blessings.” A London daily, in giving an account of a meeting presided over by Gypsy Smith, said, “Mr. Smith announced a hymn. ‘Let us sing “Count Your Blessings.”’ Said he, ‘Down in South London the men sing it, the boys whistle it, and the women rock their babies to sleep to the tune.’” During the great revival in Wales it was sung at every service, one of the leading dailies reporting the meetings, publishing in full, side by side, “The Glory Song” and “Count Your Blessings.” The foregoing are only a few of Mr. Oatman’s songs that have won their way to the hearts of Christian people everywhere. “Take Off the Old Coat,” “O Don’t Stay Away,” “The Blood Upon the Door,” “The Same Old Way,” “God’s Three Hundred,” “When the Fire Fell,” “I Know He’s Mine,” “Almost Home,” and many others are among his best. He has constantly on hand more orders for songs than he can possibly fill. In a letter to Mr. Oatman in 1892 [Professor Sweney](#) said, “What we want and what we are looking for is something new.” From that time on the song world has been getting from the pen of Rev. Johnson Oatman, Jr., something new. Withal, Brother Oatman is a firm believer in the good old doctrine of the Wesleyan theology. On July 21, 1878, Mr. Oatman was united in marriage to Miss Wilhelmina Ried, of Lumberton, N.J. Mrs. Oatman was a most devout Christian lady, who walked by her husband’s side and blessed his life until November 20, 1909, when the Lord called her to “Higher Ground.” Mr. Oatman has three children, a son and two daughters. The eldest daughter, Miriam E., is quite talented, and has written over three hundred hymns and is also a composer of music, having set music to several of her father’s hymns. “How the Fire Fell” is perhaps the most widely known. Brother Oatman hopes to give to the world in the years to come the best songs of his life.