

Silent Night¹

As legend has it, in 1818, Roman Catholic Father Joseph Mohr, an Austrian, wrote the lyrics and a friend (Franz Xaver Gruber) set them to guitar music for Christmas Eve. Why not the organ? Well, that was awaiting repairs. Some think it was sabotaged in order to stop an incoming traditionalist priest from converting the local congregation back into Latin-only mass. Perhaps someone hoped to give more time for an experiment in German-Latin masses to become established? But when the organ repairman arrived, he left with a copy of the song, passed on copies, and it went on a world tour, attributed to an anonymous history within the Austrian state of Tyrol. This identity, as a "Tyrolean folk carol," was held until the original manuscript was found and identified in 1995. It seems that Mohr, a guitarist, wrote the poem in 1816, and had Gruber give it a guitar tune two years later. Gruber's tune was soon slightly changed, and the song was first published in 1832, and translated several times into English in the C19. The standard English translation (a creative translation) is John Freeman Young's (1859?). Perhaps the first was J F Warner's, 10 years earlier. Another faded translation was by Emily Elliot (1858).

Most English versions² include just three of Mohr's six verses, stanzas 1, 6 and 2, in that order. I have focused on these three. The missing stanzas include reference to Jesus as our curly haired brother. *Silent Night* was the carol that united English & German sides during the trenches' Christmas Truce of 1914, when the guns were indeed largely quiet. I have changed the time from a historical present to a historical past. I prefer the past indicative (he slept) to an imperative (you sleep)—are we really urging a baby Jesus to sleep? I also withdraw from the idea of visual radiance coming from Jesus in his babyhood.

From: Silent night, holy night / All is calm, all is bright / Round yon virgin mother and child / Holy infant so tender and mild / Sleep in heavenly peace / Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night! / Shepherds quake at the sight / Glories stream from heaven afar / Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! / Christ, the Saviour is born / Christ, the Saviour is born.

Silent night, holy night / Son of God, love's pure light / Radiant beams from thy holy face / With the dawn of redeeming grace / Jesus, Lord, at thy birth / Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

To: Silent night, holy night / In the dark - shone God's light / Shining where that mother so mild / Looked upon her holy child / Christ the light of the world - Jesus the light of the world.

Silent night, holy night / Shepherds quaked - at the sight / Glory streamed from heaven afar / Heavenly angels sang Hallelujah / Christ our saviour was born - Jesus our saviour was born.

Silent night, holy night / Gift of heaven - oh how bright / Shone God's love through that pure infant's face / With the dawn of redeeming grace / Christ was lord at his birth - Jesus was lord at his birth.

¹ www.carols.org.uk/silent_night.htm

² I looked at over 24 on <http://silentsnight.web.za/translate/eng.htm>. All had tardisial elements.