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For countless years we continue to sing Christmas carols, with many of the words etched into our memories even though we sing them only once a year. We may hear them on the radio or television during the holiday season, or sing them in church during Advent and Christmas, but then the rest of the year we quietly tuck away the Christmas carols until later.

We're so used to the words that we may miss the stories behind their origin, such as our opening hymn "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." We travel back to 1737 to Charles Wesley, who with his brother John Wesley, began the Methodist Church movement. During Charles' daily quiet time, he wrote the words, "Hark! how all the welkin rings, glory to the King of Kings." The popularity of this new hymn caught on in his church—though have you ever heard the word *welkin*? It means the "vault of heaven makes a long noise."

George Whitefield was a controversial open-air preacher in the early American colonies, and I guess he didn't like the word *welkin*, for he published the

song with the words, "Hark! the herald angels sing." Wesley was furious, for although the Bible notes that angels appeared to the shepherds, nowhere does the Bible mention angels singing. This version of the song with the revised words, however, caught on, and 118 years later singer William Cunnings combined a tune by composer Mendelssohn with the new words to become the carol we love to sing today.

Travel back in time with me for our next Christmas carol containing words first written in 1329 by the Dominican monk Heinrich Suso. He had written a book advocating progressive thinking in the church and spoke up for the common people, but those in power condemned Suso as a heretic. One night during a dream Suso saw numerous angels singing and dancing. When he awoke, the vivid dream remained etched in his memory and he wrote the words to "Good Christian Men, Rejoice." Since music at that time was solemn and not written in the common language, this hymn broke all the

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rules and was not embraced by the church. Common folks, however, loved this song, but it was another 150 years later when the Church of England priest James Mason Neale discovered this carol and translated it into English. Neale also wanted everyone to know the joy of Christ, but he was exiled and persecuted for his progressive ideas. His English translation of this carol was first published in 1853 and spread to become a well-loved hymn, with the latest edition known as “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice.”

Sing “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” #164

Our next carol, “We Three Kings,” echoes the story from Matthew’s Gospel about the trip of the wise men from the east. Rather than kings, the travelers were following a star, so more likely they were astrologers than royalty. The story never mentions how many wise men came on the visit, though it tells us they brought three gifts, which may have led to the gift giving tradition of Christmas.

*Stories behind the Christmas Carols We Love to Sing
December 25, 2016*

In the early 1800s families hung gifts on their Christmas trees, and on the twelfth day after Christmas on Epiphany Day, they opened the gifts and took down the tree. Priest and newspaper reporter John Henry Hopkins Jr. wondered what gift to get for his nieces and nephews for Epiphany; for a gift he wrote them words telling the story of the wise men. Little was known about these ancient travelers, but with research and imagination Hopkins came up with the words we sing in our next Christmas carol.

Sing “We Three Kings” #172 stz 1

William Chatterton Dix was an insurance salesman, but after work he enjoyed his real passion—reading and writing poetry. During the mid-1800s, Christmas was not the commercialized celebration that it is today, and in order to focus on worship some churches did not allow gift giving or decorating at Christmastime. Since it wasn’t a popular day to celebrate, many hymn writers also ignored the story of Jesus’ birth.

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Dix, however, felt moved to write about the birth of Jesus in a song called “The Manger Throne.” He published the carol in England just as the Civil War was ending in the U.S., and after years of fighting, this song became an inspiration in the U.S. and began to spread in both the northern and southern churches. Someone set the words to the old Victorian carol “Greensleeves,” creating the Christmas carol we love to sing today: “What Child Is This?”

Sing “What Child Is This?” #162

John Jacob Niles had a passion for folk music, and for many years he traveled in Appalachia listening to people sing as he searched for the origins of songs. One cold day in December in North Carolina, he happened to hear a young girl who was sitting alone on a bench singing a song he had never heard before. He asked the little girl

about the song, but all she could tell him was that her mother had sung the song to her, just like her mother had learned it from her grandma.

The girl called the song “I Wonder As I Wander,” which seemed to combine the sounds of an African-American spiritual with elements of an Irish ballad. For years Niles sang the song, but he always wondered about its origin. He continued searching to learn more about the song until his death in 1980, but the song’s origin remained a mystery and he never encountered that little girl again. Thanks to that little girl and the wandering of John Niles listening to songs, we now have this favorite carol as part of our singing experience today.

Sing “I Wonder As I Wander” #161

Information adapted from *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*, Ace Collins, 2001.