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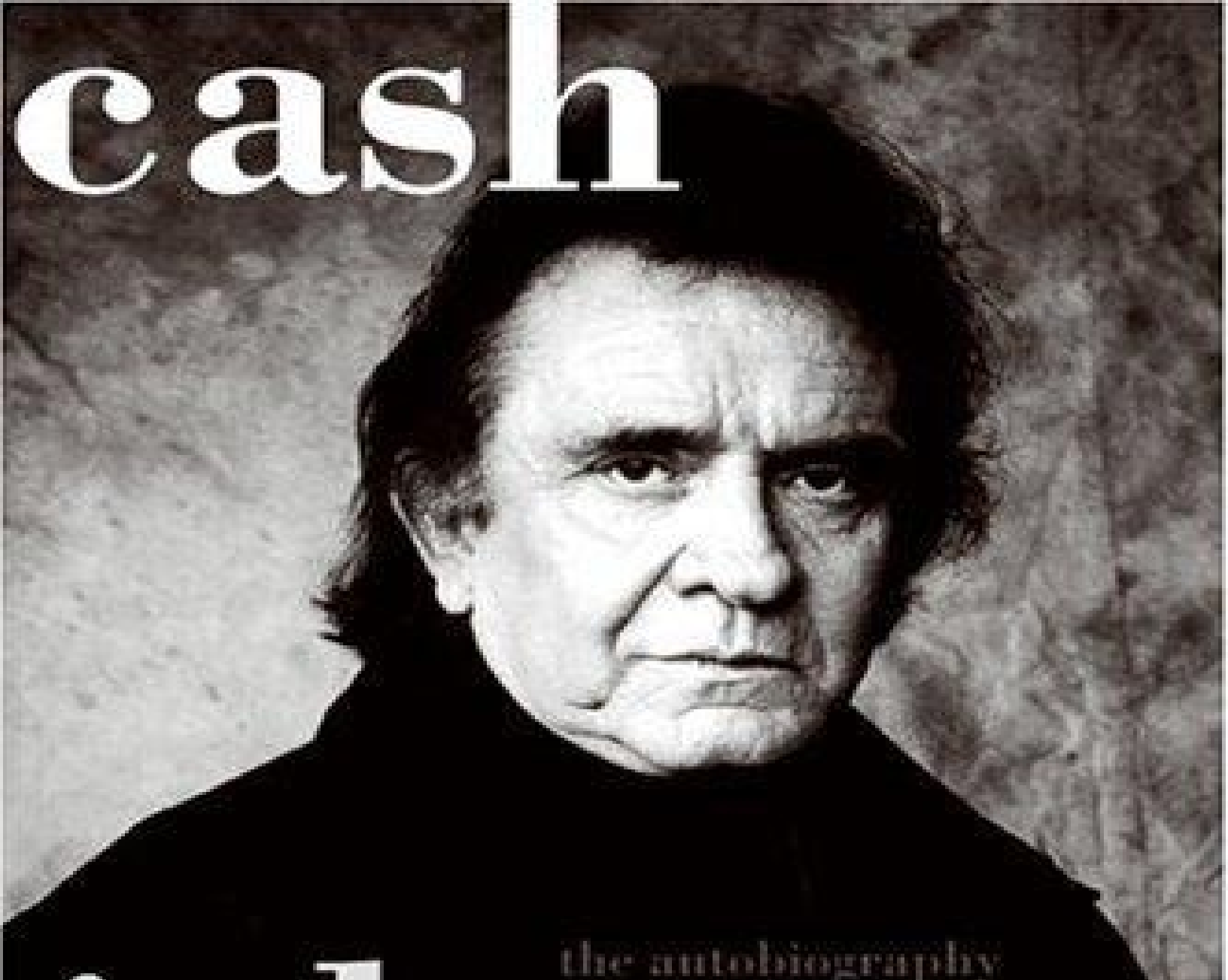


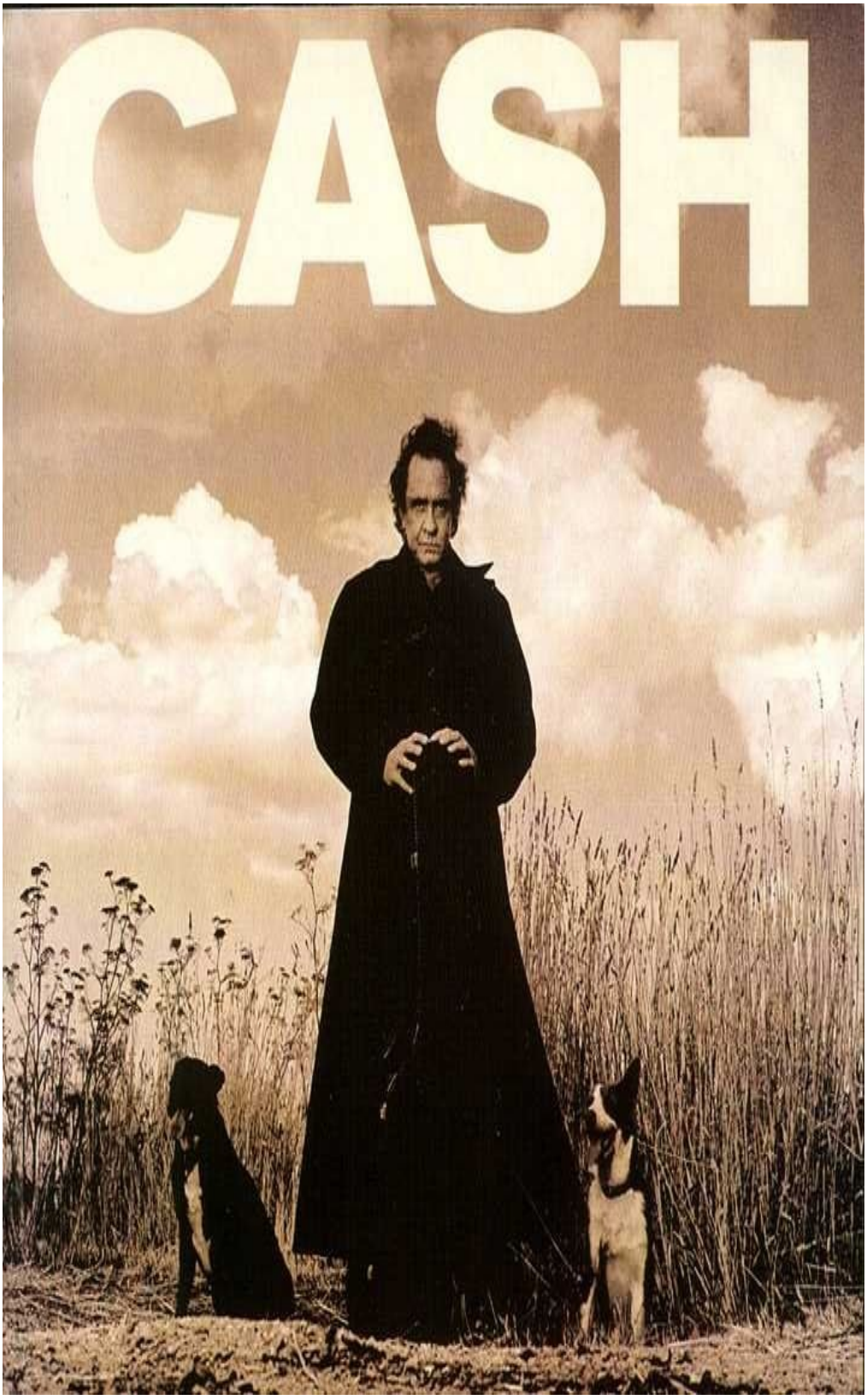
the autobiography

johnny cash

with patrick carr

cash

"This book will be my own story—what I feel, what I love, what's happened, as I remember it. . . . If my life has anything to say, I'll say it here."—Johnny Cash


CASH

Cash

by

Johnny Cash

Cash: The Autobiography

Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr

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10 East 53rd Street,
New York, NY 10022-5299

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For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022-5299.
A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1997 by Harper San Francisco, a division of HarperCollins Publisher
ISBN 0061013579

To John Carter Cash The Gift. You have it. Never forget.

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Acknowledgements For encouragement and inspiration, Jack Shaw, June Carter, Lou Robin, Mark Chimsky, Patrick Carr, Tom Grady, W. S. Holland, Karen Adams, Kelly Hancock, Lisa Trice, Joanne Cash Yates, Louise Garrett, Tommy Cash, Reba Hancock, Jack Cash, Roy Cash, and George T. and Winifred Kelley.

To Billy Graham, who suggested this book in the first place, then continued to encourage me to do it. And a special thanks to Reba Hancock. You gave all for me, day and night, for forty years. And many, many more I'll regret not mentioning when I realize that I didn't.
Patrick Carr adds some others to thank for their work on this book: David Hennessy, Debra Kalmon, Terri Leonard, Kevin McShane, Ann Moru, Karen Robin, Joseph Rutt, Robin Sturmthal, Steve Sullivan, Kris Tobiassen, Lyn Wray, and Chris Wright.

Part I Cinnamon Hill

1 My line comes down from Queen Ada, the sister of Malcolm IV, descended from King Duff, the first king of Scotland. Ada's holdings encompassed all the land east of the Miglo River in the Valley of the Bran, in what is now the county of Fife. Malcolm's castle is long gone, but you can still see some of its stones in the walls of the church tower in the little village of Strathmiglo. The motto on my people's coat of arms was “Better Times Will Come.” Their name was Caesche; with emigration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it came to be spelled the way it was pronounced, C-A-S-H. The first American Cash was William, a mariner who captained his own ship, the Good Intent, sailing out of Glasgow across the Atlantic with cargoes of pilgrims for the New World until he himself settled in Essex County, Massachusetts, in 1667. His descendants migrated to Westmoreland County, Virginia, in the very early 1700s, before George Washington was born there, and then moved on to Bedford and Amherst counties. My direct line went farther south, to Henry and Elbert counties in Georgia, where my great-grandfather, Reuben Cash, was born. He fought for the Confederacy and survived the Civil War. His home didn't. Sherman's troops stripped and burned his Georgia plantation, so he moved his family farther west, homesteading across the Mississippi in Arkansas when his son, my grandfather, William Henry Cash, was six. William Henry Cash grew up in Toledo, Arkansas, a community that began disappearing as soon as the railroad came through nearby Rison. He became a farmer and a minister, what they called a circuit rider, a traveling preacher serving four widely scattered congre- gations. He rode a horse and he carried a gun, and never once did he take a penny for his preaching—though as my daddy told it, the yard and the barn and the stables

were full of animals people had given him, and there was always enough to feed his twelve children. Parkinson's disease sent him from this world at the age of fifty-two, in 1912. Daddy, the youngest son and the only child still at home, was just fifteen at the time, but he supported my gjandmother until her death three years later, after which he enlisted in the army. His first posting, in 1916, was to General John J. Pershing's command in Deming, New Mexico, and he was under Pershing when Pancho Villa came through and burned Columbus. I remember him telling

me that for three nights he lay with his head in Mexico and his feet in Texas, waiting for Villa. Villa never came; Pershing had to go looking for him. Daddy's name was Ray Cash. He married my mother, Carrie Rivers, on August 18, 1920. I was their fourth child. Daddy had a lot, but he didn't have money. The Depression had ruined cotton farming—already a hard, marginal living for people like him at the bottom of the system—and he had to take whatever work could be had. Sometimes none could, so he spent his days roaming with his .22 rifle after squirrels, rabbits, possum, whatever might feed his family. Given a shot, he didn't miss. He couldn't afford to—in those days a box of shells cost twenty cents. He worked at the sawmill; he cleared land; he laid track for the railroad; and when no work was available locally, he rode the freights to wherever adver- tisement, rumor, or chance offered payment in cash. Our house was right on the railroad tracks, out in the woods, and one of my earliest memories is of seeing him jump out of a moving boxcar and roll down into the ditch in front of our door. Lots of men did that. The trains slowed near our house, so it was a popular spot for jumping to avoid the railroad detectives at the station in Kingsland. Those were certainly men to be avoided. I remember

Daddy telling me about a time when he'd been riding the rods—clinging to the crossbars under a moving boxcar, a terribly dangerous way of riding unobserved. When the train stopped in Pine Bluff and he crawled out, he found a railroad detective standing right there. He suffered a beating and a cussing out, which he just had to stand there and take if he didn't want jail or worse. But when the train started moving again and the detective began walking away as the caboose came by, Daddy jumped on and hung there, cursing that railroad bull until he was out of sight. He laughed about that: he got in a few licks of his own and he got to ride in style, out from under those boxcars. That same bull, by the way, picked on another hobo a while later. It wasn't his lucky day; the hobo pulled a gun and shot him dead. My name is John R. Cash. I was born on February 2.6, 193Z, in Kingsland, Arkansas. I'm one of seven children: Roy, the eldest, then Louise, Jack, myself, Reba, Joanne, and Tommy. We all grew up working the cotton fields. I married Vivian Liberto of San Antonio, Texas, when I was twenty-two and went on to have four daugh- ters with her: Rosanne, Kathy, Cindy, and Tara. Vivian and I parted, and in 1968 I married June Carter, who is still my wife. We have one child together, John Carter, my only son. June brought two daughters, Carlene and Rosie, to our marriage.

Now we have a combined total of twelve grandchildren and so many sons-in-law, past and pre- sent, that June makes a joke of it in her stage act. My work life has been simple: cotton as a youth and music as an adult. In between I was an automobile factory worker in Michigan, a radio intercept operator for the United States Air Force in Germany, and a door-to-door appliance salesman for the Home Equipment Company of Memphis, Tennessee. I was a great radio operator and a terrible salesman. I hated the assembly line.

My first records were on the Sun label, run by Mr. Sam Phillips in Memphis and featuring Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Charlie Rich, and others as well as myself. My first single was “Cry, Cry, Cry” in 1955, my first big hit “I Walk the Line” in 1956. I left Sun Records for Columbia in 1958, and shortly after that I left Memphis for California. My affair with pills had already begun. It quickly became all-consuming, eating me up for the next decade or so. Amazingly, it didn't completely ruin my career. During those years I made music I'm still proud of—par- ticularly Ride This Train, Bitter Tears, and my other con- cept albums—and I had commercial success: “Ring of Fire” was a big hit for me in 1963. By that time I'd destroyed my family and was working hard on doing the same to myself. I survived, though. I moved to Nashville, kicked my habit, and married June. My career accelerated. The Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison album was a huge success, and in 1969 I began hosting The Johnny Cash Show on the ABC TV network. After “Flesh and Blood” in 1970, I didn't have a chart-topping single until “One Piece at a Time” in 1976, long after The Johnny Cash Show was history. Between the early '70s and the early '90s I didn't sell huge numbers of records, but again I have to say that I made some music I'm still proud of, and those years weren't dull. I wrote my first autobiography, Man in Bbck, and my first novel, Man in White. I teamed up with Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, and Willie Nelson in the Highwaymen. I left Columbia, owned by CBS Records, and went to Mercury/Polygram. I got elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. I got addicted to pain pills, got treated at the Betty Ford Clinic, recovered, got addicted again, and recovered again. I just about died, got saved

by heart bypass surgery, and just about died again. I worked hundreds and hundreds of shows. I kept my operation together, more or less, until the wheel of for- tune rolled around to me again. That happened in 1994, when

I formed an alliance with Rick Rubin, producer of radically non-Nashvillian acts like the Beastie Boys and Red Hot Chili Peppers, and made my American Recordings album. According to the media at the time, that caused an overnight change in my status from “Nashville has-been” to “hip icon.” Whatever they called me, I was grateful. It was my second major comeback; the minor ones have been too many to count. I'm still on the circuit today, still recording, still writ- ing songs, still showing up to play everywhere from Midwestern auditoriums to Manhattan trend spots to the Royal Albert Hall. I'm in reasonable shape physically and financially. I'm still a Christian, as I have been all my life. Beyond that I get complicated. I endorse Kris Kristofferson's line about me: “He's a walking contradic- tion, partly truth and partly fiction.” I also like Rosanne's line: “He believes what he says, but that don't make him a saint.” I do believe what I say. There are lev- els of honesty, though. And there are levels of intimacy. I go by various names. I'm Johnny Cash in public and on record sleeves, CD labels, and billboards. I'm Johnny to many people in the business, some of them friends and acquaintances of many years. To June, I'm John, and that's my name among other intimates: my band, my sons-in-law, many friends, and people who work closely with me. Finally, I'm J.R., my name from childhood. My brothers and sis- ters and other relatives still call me that. So does Marty Stuart. Lou Robin, my manager, alternates between J.R. and John.

June recognizes that I operate at various levels, so she doesn't always call me John. When I'm paranoid or bel- ligerent, she'll say, “Go away, Cash! It's time for Johnny to come out.” Cash is her name for the star, the egoma- niac. Johnny is her name for her playmate. Several names, several homes. I'm part gypsy, part homebody, so I live according to a rhythm alien to most people but natural to me, splitting my time on a semi- predictable basis between my big house on Old Hickory Lake just outside Nashville; my farm at Bon Aqua, far- ther outside Nashville; the house in Port Richey, Florida, that June inherited from her parents; an endless succes- sion of hotels all over the world; my bus; and my house in Jamaica, Cinnamon Hill. Today I'm sitting on my back porch, high on my hill, looking out northward over the Caribbean toward Cuba ninety miles away. It's peaceful here. The occa- sional thudding of an ax or buzz of a chain saw comes down out of the woods climbing up around my house, and behind me, somewhere back in the house itself, I can hear the little sounds of Desna, Carl, Geraldine,

Donna, and Mr. Poizer, our Jamaican staff, preparing breakfast. Otherwise it's just the shifting clear light, the circling of john-crows and darting of hummingbirds, the soft rustle of tropical leaves in the trade winds. I love this place. I look over toward the front gate and see a guard walking the perimeter, one of our regulars, a wiry, grim-looking character toting a nickel-plated Remington 12.-gauge. All I can say about him is that I'm glad he's on my side. I've been thinking about the robbery—I've had to for this book, otherwise I'd just as soon forget it—but I'm not in the mood to tell that story. I'd much rather address its antidote, the flip side of violence, tragedy, addiction, and all the other many trials and tribulations this world has to offer. So right at the beginning here, I'm going to

take stock of my blessings and tell you what I'm thankful for. It always puts things in perspective. I'm thankful for a pair of shoes that really feel good on my feet; I like my shoes. I'm thankful for the birds; I feel like they're singing just for me when I get up in the morning, saying "Good morning, John. You made it, John." And that first ray of sunshine; I'm thankful for living through the night to see it. I'm thank- ful I don't have a terminal disease, that I'm in fairly good health, that I can get up in the morning and walk down and have breakfast, then walk along the jungle trails and smell the flowers—the jasmine, the love vines, the orchids. I'm thankful that I have a good wife beside me, that I can trust her and depend on her in a lot of ways. I'm thankful she's a soul mate, that we can talk to each other sometimes without even speaking and have an under- standing on a lot of things. I'm thankful she loves my children. I'm thankful I don't have rambling on my mind, that I'm not thinking about other women, so long as I keep my heart and mind together. I'm thankful I don't have a passion for cars, like so many entertainers who blow all their money that way— my car is almost nine years old and I have no intention of trading it in. I'm thankful that money is not my god, that for me it's a means to an end. I'm thankful for my family—thankful for daughters and grandchildren and a son who love me, and thankful that their love is unconditional. I have a lot of good friends, and I'm thankful for them, too. I'm thankful for my gift—my mother always called my voice "the gift"—and that even though I haven't writ- ten a song in quite a while, I've got a bunch of them rais- ing Cain in my brain, wanting to be laid down on paper. I'm thankful that God has inspired me to want to write,

and that He might possibly use me to influence some- body for the