

The Snow from Isabel Trevithoe by C. Alice Roberts Elgar: a Poetry Friday post

In 1879, Caroline Alice Roberts (who went by her middle name), published a lengthy (64 page) poem entitled *Isabel Trevithoe* under her initials, "C.A.R." Her epic poem, which I confess I have not read in full, is about a man named Gilbert who was charmed as a child by Isabel, who (also a child) sang a beautiful song about snow that captivated him. (Spoiler alert: the final line of the poem/book is "But Gilbert lived and married Isabel" Apparently after having traveled around the world and gotten himself engaged to Lady Norah, who valiantly gives him up to his earlier love.) Isabel's song is below:

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O snow, which sinks so light,
Brown earth is hid from sight
O soul, be thou as white as snow,
O snow, which falls so slow,
Dear earth quite warm below;
O heart, so keep thy glow
Beneath the snow.

O snow, in thy soft grave
Sad flow'rs the winter brave;
O heart, so sooth and save, as does the snow.
The snow must melt, must go,
Fast, fast as water flow.
Not thus, my soul, O sow
Thy gifts to fade like snow.

O snow, thou'rt white no more,
Thy sparkling too, is o'er;
O soul, be as before,
Was bright the snow.
Then as the snow all pure,
O heart be, but endure;
Through all the years full sure,
Not as the snow.

Alice came from a well-connected family and was exceedingly accomplished, having studied geology, speaking fluent German, Italian, Spanish, and French, and writing both poems and a novel, *Marchcroft Manor*. In 1886, she began studying piano accompaniment with Edward Elgar, a local music teacher. In 1889, she married him, despite his being from the tradesman class, younger than her by nine years, and Roman Catholic.

She gave up a lot of her own ambitions in order to support her husband, opining at one point in her diary that "The care of a genius is enough of a life work for any woman." She dedicated herself to helping her husband, assisting her husband in setting up his composition paper, providing feedback, and serving as his social secretary and business manager, as well as being his wife and the mother of their only child, Carice.

Though she didn't pursue her writing as vigorously as before her marriage, she did, however, maneuver things so that her husband's music got attention from the "right" people, and became Lady Elgar in 1904 once her husband was knighted by King Edward VII of England.

Along the way, in 1895, Edgar Elgar wrote a musical setting of the lovely song written as part of an epic poem by his wife some 16 years earlier, before they met. (Many listings of the song, which has its own fame and is a gorgeous, glorious choral piece for soprano and alto voices accompanied by piano and two violins, refer to Alice as a librettist.)

The words of the poem are evocative and lush, all long vowels (mostly O), with the wonderful ending with hope that the hearer's heart will endure throughout the years, and not melt away like the snow. I should note that this song appears really early in the poem, and pretty much intimates the overall plot (where one falls from grace, but love manages to endure).

Below is a great recording by a youth choir (with piano and violin accompaniment) of the setting, which I had the great good fortune to sing in choirs when I was in high school. With the snow storm coming tonight that may bring us some serious accumulation for the first time this winter, I thought I'd celebrate it and its beauty.

