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Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry

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Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, eds.
Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry.

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Reviewed by Susan Elizabeth Howe

It is unfortunate but nevertheless true that most of today's educated readers do not understand, are indifferent to, or even dislike poetry. Given that fact, many readers might pass up *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* without so much as a glance at its contents. That would be a mistake. In preparing this comprehensive collection of Eliza R. Snow's poetry, editors Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson have rightly understood that Eliza's writings have great significance in their relationship to her personal life as well as the religious and historical events to which she was responding. Derr and Davidson have provided such contextual information by including in the introduction an overview of Snow's poetry and a short biography. They also introduce each chapter with more specific historical and personal information about the period in Snow's life when the chapter's poems were written. By preceding each of the 507 poems with an explanation of the context and all unfamiliar references, the reader is prepared to encounter and understand Eliza's verse.

Chapter 1 includes Eliza's earliest work, the poems she wrote between 1825 and 1835. The chapter introduction discusses her parents and grandparents, the home she grew up in, and her development as a poet. She published her first poem in the *Western Courier* newspaper in 1825 when she was twenty-one, after which her poems were regularly featured there and in the *Ohio Star* (3). Influenced by the teachings of Alexander Campbell, Eliza embraced New Testament Christianity and was later convinced that Joseph Smith was the one called to restore the primitive Christian gospel (4). In 1835, she was baptized a member of the Church and gathered with the Saints to Kirtland (4).

The cumulative information provided by each chapter's introduction gives ample evidence that Eliza lived through extraordinary events in the history of Mormonism. Readers interested not only in literature but in early Church history will be satisfied to learn what Eliza considered important

enough to write about during these momentous years of her life. Chapter 2 describes the years between 1838 and 1842, when Eliza and her family fled Missouri with the rest of the Saints, hoped for redress from the United States government, and attempted to establish a life for themselves in Illinois (73–76). Between 1842 and 1845, the years of chapter 3, Eliza became the secretary of the Nauvoo Relief Society, married Joseph Smith, mourned his martyrdom, and then married Brigham Young (197–207). During the years covered in chapter 4, from 1846 to 1849, the Saints were driven from Nauvoo and suffered the long arduous journey across middle America to reach the Great Basin.

One of the most interesting time periods in the book is chronicled in chapter 5, from 1850 to 1856, that interlude of peace the Saints experienced in their new home in the West, before U.S. military troops and others again arrived to oppose their lifestyle and their hegemonic government. During the years of chapter 6, from 1857 to 1865, the Saints found their home and refuge invaded by U.S. soldiers. When the Civil War broke out, Eliza claimed that the Latter-day Saints in the Mountain West were the only people preserving the freedoms and government established by the Founding Fathers, and that the United States government had led the country into dissolution and moral decadence (611–12). Chapters 7 through 9 take up the last twenty-one years of Eliza's life, in which she wrote poems for children (701–4), organized Relief Societies throughout the wards of the Church, presided over the General Relief Society, supervised the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association and Primary (703, 960), went on a tour of Europe and the Holy Land with her brother Lorenzo and other leaders (823), and helped to oppose the legal straightjacket created by U.S. federal legislation and territorial officers seeking to control or eliminate the Church (822, 961). To see these events through Eliza's poems is to see how they were perceived by and deeply affected the people who experienced them.

After she moved to Kirtland, she apparently did not write any poems for three years. Then Joseph Smith asked her to write poems on behalf of the Church (73), to help the larger U.S. community identify with the injustices the Saints had experienced, as well as to encourage and remind Church members of the nobility of their callings and the blessings God would bestow on them for faithfulness. As early as the Nauvoo period, Eliza became known as "Zion's Poetess" (393), and many of her poems chronicle the mistreatment of the Saints in Illinois and Missouri. "The Gathering of the Saints, and the Commencement of the City of Adam-ondi-Ahman" (78–84) reviews the attacks suffered by the Saints trying to settle Adam-ondi-Ahman and asks, "Where are thy far-fam'd laws, Columbia? Where / Thy boasted freedom—thy protecting care? / Is *this* a land of Rights? Stern

facts shall say / If legal justice here maintains its sway” (lines 175–78). Eliza published twenty poems in the *Quincy Whig*; the first few poems were written to win the sympathy of the Illinois citizens for the Mormons who had been expelled from Missouri: “There’s a dark, foul stain on the Eagle’s crest, / For Columbia’s sons, have her sons oppress’t; / And chas’d into exile, now they roam / Far away from their land, and their much lov’d home!” (85–86, lines 19–22). To cheer and encourage the Saints as they traveled in wagons away from their homes in Nauvoo and toward a new, unknown land, she composed several songs the Saints sang at night around the campfire: “Lo! A mighty host of Jacob / Tented on the western shore / Of the noble Mississippi, / Which they had been crossing o’er; / At the last day’s dawn of winter, / Bound with frost and wrapt in snow: / Hark! The sound is onward, onward! / *Camp of Israel!* Rise and go” (321–22, lines 1–7). Her poems of this era are emphatically faithful; they assure the Saints that God is with them, that their trials will bring the Lord’s blessings, and that all will be well.

Another responsibility that fell to Eliza as Zion’s Poetess was to write poems for special occasions, many of which were set to music. For the Twenty-fourth of July celebration of 1850, she wrote four compositions: “National Song” (397–98), which was sung by the choir; “Ode to Deseret” (398–400), which was recited by Edgar Blodget; “Young Ladies’ Song for the Twenty-Fourth” (400–402), appropriately sung by a chorus of young women; and “National Anthem” (402–3), sung before a flag called “The Flag of Deseret,” which seems to recognize Deseret as its own separate nation. Eliza composed another ten poems or songs for Twenty-fourth of July celebrations between 1851 and 1885 and eleven for the Fourth of July during the same time period. This is not to mention her twenty-one hymns, many of which have endured in the hymnody of the Latter-day Saints, including “O My Father” (312–14), “Though Deep’ning Trials” (130–32), “The Time Is Far Spent” (415–16), “Think Not When You Gather to Zion” (518–20), “How Great the Wisdom and the Love” (840–42), and “Behold, the Great Redeemer Die” (842–43).

A great deal more could be said of her poems than can be included in this brief review. Eliza wrote psalms, sonnets, elegies, epic poems of broad historic sweep, theological addresses for such organizations as the Polysophical Society and the Literary and Musical Assembly, and poems of comfort, welcome, and farewell. Her best poems are often in blank verse, and she demonstrated considerable virtuosity in creating poems with a variety of meters and stanzaic patterns.

Much of Eliza R. Snow’s poetry was public and communal, but Derr and Davidson also direct the reader to occasional glimpses of her private life as revealed in her poetry. There are good reasons to conclude that the poem

“Narcissa to Narcissus” (94–95) can be read as Eliza’s explanation of how she came to love Joseph Smith. The poem says that she was at first indifferent to him, until she learned of his compassion, his principled behavior, his steadfastness, and his “towering soul” (line 17). The poem concludes, “I lov’d thee then, for virtue’s sake, / And ’twas no crime to part / With all that wealth bestows to make / The purchase of thy heart” (lines 21–24). Likewise, “The Bride’s Avowal” (210–11), although it is inscribed “to Miss L. for Her Bridal Morning” and may have been a gift to a woman named Irena Elizabeth Lincoln on her wedding day, quite plausibly expresses Eliza’s feelings about her own marriage to Joseph Smith two months before the poem was published. The poem is written in the voice of the bride and begins “Dearest, the hour approaches, / Our destinies to twine / In one eternal wreath of fate, / As holy beings join” (lines 1–4). The end of the poem seems to express the particular relationship that must have existed between Eliza and Joseph with these lines:

The world has smil’d upon me—
 I scorn its flattery,
 For nought but thy *approving look*,
 Is happiness to me.
 I would not sell thy *confidence*,
 For all the pearls that strew
 The ocean’s bed or all the gems
 That sparkle in Peru. (lines 17–24)

Other tender revelations in these poems are the deep and abiding relationships Eliza developed with her Latter-day Saint sisters. She writes to Sarah Kimball, “Sarah, I love you—I have lov’d you long / With love that can’t be utter’d in a song— / That will not perish with life’s hopes and fears, / But lives and strengthens with increasing years” (443, lines 1–4). In the poem “To Mrs. Mary Ann Young” (359–60), Brigham Young’s sole wife before the introduction of polygamy, she writes, “Mother of mothers! Queen of queens / For such thou truly art— / I pray the Lord to strengthen thee / And to console thy heart” (lines 1–4). To Eliza Partridge, she says, “You know, dear Girl, that God is just— / He wields almighty pow’r; / Fear not his faithfulness to trust / In the most trying hour” (265–66, lines 1–4). There are hundreds of poems to other women (and also to men), comforting them on the death of a loved one or encouraging them through difficult circumstances.

Just who all the individuals are that Eliza addresses in her poems is made clear by the carefully researched introductions to each poem. For example, poem 174 is titled “To Mrs. E. A. W.” The introduction indicates that Mrs. E. A. W. was Elizabeth Ann Smith Whitney, first counselor in

the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, known for her compassion and her gift of healing. It also gives a brief biography of Whitney's life, notes that she and Eliza participated together in women's prayer meetings, recounts that Eliza had rejoiced to hear "Mother Whitney" singing in tongues, and explains LDS doctrines mentioned in the poem—those of premortal existence, eternal progression, Elohim or God the Father, and Jesus Christ, the Redeemer and Elder Brother of humankind. The poem was composed while Eliza and her sisters in the gospel were living in Winter Quarters, suffering from inadequate food and housing. Mother Whitney was concerned about the frailty of her two youngest children, and it is likely that Eliza wrote this poem to comfort and encourage her (350).

Such careful, thorough scholarship is the hallmark of *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry*. Besides the introductions to the entire volume, to each chapter, and to each poem, Derr and Davidson have also provided an appendix with poems attributed to Eliza that may not have been written by her; a section of textual notes that provides the variant texts of each poem and the text of whatever poem or letter Eliza may have been responding to. There is a twenty-two-page bibliography of sources cited in the book and three indexes: title and first line index, scripture index, and general index. This wonderful collection of Eliza R. Snow's poems is usable in every way. Karen Lynn Davidson and Jill Mulvay Derr are to be thanked for the preparation of this extraordinary book that will help us become acquainted with Eliza R. Snow's poetry and to know this remarkable Church leader in a far deeper and more significant way.

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