



In her hymns and her hundreds of poems, Eliza R. Snow captured nineteenth-century Mormonism in revealing detail while conveying sublime truths about the human condition. In this superb study, every known Eliza R. Snow poem is presented with historical context and perceptive commentary. *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry*, a copublication of Brigham Young University Press and University of Utah Press, is available at <http://byustudies.byu.edu>. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

# Eliza R. Snow's Poetry

*Edited by Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson*

As plural wife of two prophets and sister of a third, as an admired leader of women, and as an acknowledged voice of the Saints to the outside world, Eliza R. Snow was as close to the center of formative events and ideas as any woman of early Mormondom. More than her letters, discourses, or journals, her poems are comprehensive in their scope and as immediate as snapshots in their depiction of Mormon culture. The more than five hundred poems written by Snow capture the lived Mormonism of the nineteenth century, where revelation and history intersected and Latter-day Saints labored for the meeting of heaven and earth they named Zion.

*Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* is a collection of all her known poems, drawn from both published and manuscript sources dating from 1825 to 1887. The poems are arranged chronologically, and in the samples on the following pages, footnotes and annotations from the book appear as endnotes. She was twenty-one years old when her first poem appeared under a pseudonym in a frontier Ohio newspaper and eight weeks away from her death at the age of eighty-three when her last poem appeared in the Mormon *Woman's Exponent*. Her "variegated life,"<sup>1</sup> as she described it, swept her across the United States, from the East to the Midwest to the West, and briefly abroad. She moved not only geographically but also spiritually, from Christian primitivist to Latter-day Saint, from unmarried adult to plural wife of two prophets, from faithful follower to renowned leader. Her poems document these passages. She did not journey alone or write in isolation: ties to her family and friends, to her people, and to her nation shaped her subject matter and her sentiments. Connections and painful disconnections are the substance of her work.

For Snow, the writing of poems was a sacred calling, a means of drawing people closer to God and of building a holy community. Through poetry that evidenced her capacity for revelation, Snow affirmed the promise and possibility of revelation for every ordinary Saint. This annotated collection of Snow's poems provides a window on her self-understanding as a poet, as a woman, and as a Latter-day Saint. Indeed, her title as "Zion's Poetess"<sup>2</sup> underscores the essential importance of her religion, her vocation as poet, and her gender.

When Eliza R. Snow died, the *New York Times* noted the demise of "the Mormon Poetess . . . one of the central figures of the Mormon galaxy."<sup>3</sup> Snow was without question the most important woman of letters to emerge from early Mormonism. Whether a comprehensive collection of Snow's poems will broaden her reputation as a poet among and beyond Latter-day Saints remains to be seen. Certainly, it will further secure the hope Snow expressed as a young unknown poet: "*I would not be forgotten quite.*"<sup>4</sup>

The following poems with introductory notes providing historical context are a handful of the more than five hundred compiled in *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry*, recently produced by BYU Studies, copublished by Brigham Young University Press and University of Utah Press.

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1. Eliza R. Snow, "Sketch," in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995; reprint, Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000), 6.

2. E[mmeline] B. W[ells], "Pen Sketch of an Illustrious Woman," *Woman's Exponent* 10 (1 November 1881): 82.

3. "The Mormon Poetess Dead," *New York Times*, 6 December 1887.

4. Eliza R. Snow, "Forget Me Not," Poem 35 in Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, eds., *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry*, l. 32; italics in original.

## 9 The Farmer's Wife

Although the Snow family lived in town—Mantua, Ohio—ERS's father, Oliver Snow, was, according to her, "a farmer by occupation," familiar with the hardships and privations of the heavily timbered Ohio country. As a young girl growing up in a small community, ERS learned how to spin, dye, and weave. Her mother, Rosetta Pettibone Snow, "considered a practical knowledge of housekeeping the best, and most efficient foundation on which to build a magnificent structure of womanly accomplishments—that useful knowledge was the most reliable basis of independence."<sup>1</sup> Although this poem may seem to be a romantic, sentimental notion of rural joys, it is more complex than it first appears. "The Farmer's Wife" comments indirectly on the question of women's roles in a changing society. The praise of the farmer's wife echoes Proverbs 31, the tribute to the virtuous woman whose "price is above rubies." When ERS copied this poem into her 1842–1882 journal, she dated it 1828; no published version of the poem has been found.

If there's a smile on nature's face  
 It is the farmer's dwelling place—  
 If house-wife has whereof to boast  
 The farmer's wife may claim the most.  
 The richest products of the soil, 5  
 The finest wheat, the wine and oil—  
 The fruits, the dainties of the land,  
 Are at the farmer's wife's command.

The wool and flax which he provides,  
 She manufactures and divides 10  
 Among her household as they need.<sup>2</sup>  
 She's blest in blessing—rich indeed!  
 Well busied at the wheel and loom  
 Her constant feet abide at home:  
 Her husband's heart rewards her toil, 15  
 Without distrust—no fear of spoil.<sup>3</sup>

Well skill'd in all domestic cares—  
 Content to mind her own affairs—  
 What truly makes a woman blest  
 Is by the farmer's wife possess'd. 20  
 Ye idle fair, who scorn employment,  
 Yours is a mimic pale enjoyment:  
 The royal treasures of content,  
 Unto the farmer's wife, are sent.

Ye maidens who are blest with sense, 25  
 Wit, beauty and intelligence;  
 Whene'er you leave the single life,  
 Be each, a thrifty farmer's wife.  
 Ye vainer ones, who're fond of show,  
 Who step so mincing as you go,<sup>4</sup> 30  
 If you would make the best of life,  
 Be, (if you can) the farmer's wife.

[pages 20–22]  
 composed 1828

#### 44 On Being Importun'd by a Friend, to Write

This undated poem from ERS's journal constitutes a paradox: while claiming that poetic inspiration has deserted her, ERS writes one of her best poems, a poignant expression of her frustration. It is placed here in the collection because it may belong to the nearly three-year period, from January 1836 to October 1838, for which no ERS poems, published or unpublished, have yet been located. She felt the impact of the dissension, persecution, and displacement Church members experienced in Ohio and Missouri during these years. Whatever the reason for the dark feelings expressed in this poem, her discouragement—and it is the only time in her writings that she reveals such negative feelings concerning her poetic role—is unmistakable. The friend's request to her is not for a single poem to commemorate or celebrate an event, but for ERS to resume composing sacred poetry (l. 6), a role to which Joseph Smith appointed her in 1838. ERS left no indication of the identity of the friend referred to in the poem's title.

Friendship's imperative—I own its sway;  
 Its unction,<sup>5</sup> angels dare not disobey;  
     And could its sacred voice inspire  
     Sweet pathos through my slumb'ring lyre,  
 To you I'd dedicate its softest lay. 5

You ask me to awake its chords again—  
 But dull monotonies would fill the strain  
     For every strain has been twice sung,  
     And every chorus, three times rung,  
 And every novelty has grown insane. 10

I would not aim at things, before unsung,  
 Nor such as move upon a seraph's tongue,  
     But, till its numbers shall be fraught  
     With novel sound and native thought,  
 O, let my stupid lyre remain unstrung.  
[page 77]  
n.d.

## 155 Song for the Camp of Israel

Written the day the Latter-day Saints departed from Sugar Creek, Iowa, journeying like ancient Israel to a place of refuge, this song portrays camp life in unusual and vivid detail. “Most midwestern poetry,” writes John E. Hallwas, “did not reflect the reality of life on the frontier” but focused instead on “romantic diction and sentimentality.” ERS’s poems, however, “are strikingly original in subject matter.”<sup>6</sup> Her refrain, “all is well” (l. 32), echoing the watchman’s cry, predates William Clayton’s use of those words in the pioneer anthem now titled “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” which was written on 15 April 1846.<sup>7</sup>

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, 5  
     Bound with frost and wrapt in snow:  
 Hark! the sound is onward, onward!  
     *Camp of Israel!* rise and go.

All at once is life and motion,  
 Trunks and beds, and baggage fly; 10  
 Oxen yok'd and horses harness'd,—  
 Tents roll'd up, are passing by;  
 Soon the carriage-wheels are rolling  
 Onward to a woodland dell,  
 Where, at sunset, all are quarter'd: 15

*Camp of Israel!* all is well.  
 Thickly round the tents are cluster'd  
 Neighbouring smokes, together blend;  
 Supper serv'd, the hymns are chanted,  
 And the evening prayers ascend. 20  
 Last of all the guards are station'd:  
 Heavens! must guards be serving here;  
 Who would harm the houseless exiles?  
*Camp of Israel!* never fear.

Where is freedom? Where is justice? 25  
 Both have from this nation fled;  
 And the blood of martyr'd prophets  
 Must be answer'd on its head!  
 Therefore, to your tents, O Jacob!  
 Like our father Abram dwell; 30  
 God will execute his purpose:  
*Camp of Israel!* all is well.

[pages 321–22]

composed 1 March 1846

published in *Millennial Star*, 1 July 1848

## 231 To Mrs. Haywood

ERS penned this poem in the autograph album of Martha Spence Heywood (spelled Haywood by ERS), a native of Ireland who emigrated to the United States in 1834. She was a Millerite or “Advent preacher” before becoming a Latter-day Saint in 1848. Martha traveled to the Salt Lake Valley in 1850, arriving on 6 October. Three weeks later, on Sunday, 27 October, she noted in her journal: “I made a call on Sister Eliza Snow and was so pleased with her that I was persuaded to remain the afternoon.”<sup>8</sup> Martha

became the third wife of Joseph Leland Heywood, merchant and bishop of the Seventeenth Ward, in January 1851, and she moved south with him to the new settlement of Salt Creek (Nephi) that September. She was visiting Salt Lake City in May 1853 when ERS composed this poem for her.<sup>9</sup> In one of her most original personal tributes, ERS builds on a fine extended metaphor—a masked drama that symbolizes the disguises and superficialities of mortal life.

Like the figures *incog*,<sup>10</sup> in a masquerade scene,  
 Are some spirits now dwelling on earth;  
 And we judge of them only by actions and mien,  
 Unappriz'd of all relative worth.

In the transforming mask of mortality clad, 5  
 Kings and princes and peasants appear;  
 All forgetting whatever acquaintance they had  
 In existence preceding this here.<sup>11</sup>

When the *past* shall develop, the *future* unfold,  
 When the *present* its sequel shall tell— 10  
 When unmask'd we shall know, be beheld, and behold;  
 O how blest, if *incog. we've done well.*

[pages 446–47]  
 composed 27 May 1853  
 published in *Poems* 1, 1856

## 426 A Winter Soliloquy

Just how good a poet was Eliza R. Snow? This poem, along with poems 427 and 428, seems to spring from pure poetic impulse, rather than from ERS's role as a spokesperson for the Saints, and these poems are among her finest. The dates and circumstances of their composition are unknown. They were first published in *Poems* 2 (1877). The three poems are written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), the form of much of ERS's most successful work. "A Winter Soliloquy" shows her awareness of the subtle possibilities of the iambic pentameter line. As do all effective writers of blank verse, she occasionally reverses the stress order of the first foot so the stressed syllable begins the line; besides avoiding metrical monotony, each reversed foot (ll. 2, 5, 14, 26, and 27 are examples) calls attention to the drama of the line. Her placement of the line's natural pause



(the caesura) varies from line to line, giving a pleasing rhythmic variety, as does her mixture of end-stopped lines and those that continue without pause. Spring always follows winter, and thus resurrection is inherent in nature. ERS affirms that the sacrifice of the Savior Jesus Christ promises spring and newness of life for humankind. In a wonderful final line, she ties man's mortal life back to the foreboding metaphor that begins the poem.

I hear—I see its tread as Winter comes—  
 Clad in white robes, how terribly august!  
 Its voice spreads terror—ev'ry step is mark'd  
 With devastation! Nature in affright,  
 Languid and lifeless, sinks before the blast. 5

Should nature mourn? No: gentle Spring, ere long,  
 Will reascend the desolated throne:  
 Her animating voice will rouse from death,  
 Emerging from its chains, more beauteous far,  
 The world of variegated Nature. 10

Not so with man—Rais'd from the lowly dust,  
 He blooms awhile; but when he fades, he sets  
 To rise no more—on earth no more to bloom!  
 Swift is his course and sudden his decline!  
 Behold, to-day, his pulse beat high with hope— 15  
 His arms extended for the eager grasp  
 Of pleasure's phantom, fancy's golden ken  
 Paints in a gilded image on his heart.  
 Behold, to-morrow where? Ah! who can tell?  
 Ye slumb'ring tenants, will not you reply? 20  
 No: from his bow, death has a quiver sent,  
 And seal'd your senses in a torpid sleep.  
 Then who can tell? The living know him not:  
 Altho' perhaps, a friend or two, may drop  
 A tear, and say he's gone—she is no more! 25

Hark! from on high a glorious sound is heard,  
 Rife with rich music in eternal strains.  
 The op'ning heavens, by revelation's voice  
 Proclaim the key of knowledge<sup>12</sup> unto man.

A Savior comes—He breaks the icy chain; 30  
 And man, resuscitated from the grave,  
 Awakes to life and immortality,  
 To be himself—more perfectly himself,  
 Than e'er he bloom'd in the primeval state  
 Of his existence in this wintry world.

[pages 825–28]  
 published in *Poems* 2, 1877

#### 454 “Our former, loved associates”

As they crossed the United States following their grand tour to Europe, Palestine, and Africa, ERS and Lorenzo Snow stopped in Ohio for a visit to their childhood home. “Those of our relatives and acquaintances who remain, received us with affectionate cordiality,” reported ERS. “Even children born since we left that country came distances to see and converse with us, the former friends of their deceased parents. . . . We visited night and day—going from place to place in rapid succession. I am inclined to think that so much visiting was never before done in so little time.”<sup>13</sup> The pair also gathered genealogical information and stopped in Kansas to visit their youngest brother, Samuel Pearce Snow, whom they had not seen for more than twenty years. The following wistful verses appeared in the *Woman’s Exponent* as part of ERS’s letter dated 20 June 1873 from St. Louis, Missouri.

Our former, loved associates,  
 Have mostly passed away;  
 While those we knew as children  
 Are crowned with locks of gray.

We saw Time’s varied traces, 5  
 Were deep on every hand—  
 Indeed, upon the people,  
 More mark’d, than on the land.

The hands that once, with firmness,  
 Could grasp the ax and blade, 10  
 Now move with trembling motion,  
 By strength of nerve decay’d.

The change in form and feature,  
 And furrows on the cheek;  
 Of time's increasing volume,  
 In plain, round numbers speak,

15

And thus, as in a mirror's  
 Reflection, we were told,  
 With stereotyp'd impressions,  
 The fact of growing old.

[pages 879–80]

composed 20 June 1873

published in *Woman's Exponent*, 1 August 1873

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1. Eliza R. Snow, "Sketch of My Life," in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995; rpt, Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000), 6.

2. See Proverbs 31:13, 15.

3. See Proverbs 31:11.

4. See Isaiah 3:16.

5. That which softens or mitigates.

6. John E. Hallwas, "The Midwestern Poetry of Eliza R. Snow," *Western Illinois Regional Studies* 5 (Fall 1982): 145.

7. *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), no. 30; William Clayton, *William Clayton's Journal: A Daily Record of the Journey of the Original Company of Mormon Pioneers from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1921), 19.

8. Juanita Brooks, ed., *Not by Bread Alone: The Journal of Martha Spence Heywood, 1850–56* (Salt Lake City: Utah Historical Society, 1978), 35.

9. Brooks, *Not by Bread Alone*, 64, 79–80.

10. Incognito.

11. Refers to the Latter-day Saint belief in a premortal existence. See poem 152.

12. See Doctrine and Covenants 84:19.

13. George A. Smith, Lorenzo Snow, Paul A. Schettler, and Eliza R. Snow, *Correspondence of Palestine Tourists, Comprising a Series of Letters* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Steam Printing Establishment, 1875), 381.