

In the Bleak Midwinter

Hymn Story by Harry Eskew

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894), born in London, England, was the daughter of Gabriele Rossetti, professor of Italian at King's College. Because of her beauty, she became a model for portraits of the Madonna by British artists, including her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. From her mid-teen years, she was in poor health and found solace in her writing of prose and poetry, as did other British women of her century who likewise suffered from chronic illness, including well-known hymn writers Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871) and Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879).

Although not primarily known as a hymn writer, Rossetti published three collections of poems and four devotional books with a focus on children's poetry. Her poems originally appeared in periodicals and were later published along with her other verse by her brother in a collected edition in 1904. A devout Anglican, she was influenced by the Oxford or Anglo-Catholic movement of the Church of England. Religious devotion played a major role in Rossetti's life. Well-known British poets such as Tennyson praised her work. With the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1861, Rossetti was hailed as her successor. Rossetti is honored with a feast day on April 27 in the calendar of the Church of England. She died in December 1894 and was buried in London's High Cemetery. The place where she died, in Torrington Square, is identified with a stone tablet.

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign:
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
But His mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved with a kiss.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give Him my heart.

In her poem, "In the Bleak Mindwinter," Rossetti describes the season of the birth of Jesus as a typical British winter: "bleak midwinter"; "frosty wind"; "earth . . . hard as

iron”; “water like a stone,” and “snow on snow.” In the second stanza, she describes the incarnation of Jesus, noting the temporality of heaven and earth in the second coming of Jesus and the sufficiency of a stable for his birth. In the third stanza, she imagines that angelic hosts populated the birthplace of Jesus, contrasting them to the simplicity of his mother who expressed her love in a kiss.

In the final and perhaps most popular stanza, Rossetti moves from the general to the specific, asks what she can personally give to Jesus, tenders what she could give as a shepherd or a wise man, and ends with her individual answer to the question: she can give Jesus her heart.

Rossetti’s poem became a Christmas carol through the work of two great British composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) and Gustav Theodore Holst (1874-1934). Vaughan Williams invited Holst to compose a musical setting for Rosseti’s poem that was subsequently published in the widely used and influential *English Hymnal* of 1906. The tune, CRANHAM, is the name of a village near Cheltenham, the birthplace of Holst.

In the Bleak Midwinter

Christina G. Rossetti, 1872; alt.

1 In the bleak mid - win - ter, frost - y wind made moan,
 2 Our God tran-scends all heav - en, earth, and its do - main;
 3 An - gels and arch - an - gels may have gath-ered there,
 4 What can I of - fer, poor as I am?

earth stood hard as i - ron, wa - ter like a stone;
 heaven and earth shall flee a-way when Christ comes to reign;
 cher - u - bim and ser - a-phim thronged the mid - night air;
 If I were a shep - herd, I would bring a lamb.

Snow had fall - en, snow on snow, snow on snow,
 In the bleak mid - win - ter a sta - ble place suf - ficed the
 But his moth - er on - ly, in her maid - en bliss,
 If I were a wise one, I would do my part; but

in the bleak mid - win - ter, long a - go.
 sov - ereign God al - might - y, Je - sus Christ.
 wor - shiped the be - lov - ed with a kiss.
 what I can I of - fer: all my heart.

Tune: CRANHAM Irr.
Gustav Holst, 1906