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ALMA STRETTELL (1853-1939)



Sargent, J John Singer. *Alma Strettell*. 1889.
http://www.jssgallery.org/Paintings/Alma_Strettell.htm

Alma Strettell was the daughter of Laura Vansittart Neale and Reverend Alfred Baker Strettell, who served as the British consular chaplain in Genoa (1851-74) and later as rector of St. Martin's Church in Canterbury. Alma was raised in Italy and came to London after her older sister, Alice Vansittart Strettell (1850-1927), married art critic Joseph Comyns Carr (1849-1916) in 1873. Carr was a champion of the Pre-Raphaelite artists and co-directed the Grosvenor Gallery before founding the New Gallery in 1888. A writer and fashion designer (known particularly for designing Ellen Terry's costume for Shakespeare's character Lady Macbeth), Alma's sister Alice became a prominent figure in London aesthetic circles, and was considered by some to be the inspiration for "Mrs. Cimabue Brown,"

one of the Aesthetes mocked in George du Maurier's cartoons in *Punch*. Both sisters were well acquainted with leading writers and artists, including Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Edmund Gosse, Henry James, George Meredith, and others.

James introduced the Carrs and Alma Strettell to the painter John Singer Sargent, with whom Alma became a very close friend. They were both Wagner enthusiasts and would spend hours at the piano playing and singing through his operatic scores. Strettell was also a good friend of Mary "Queen" Mellen Palmer, wife of General William Jackson Palmer, the founder of the city of Colorado Springs. Strettell spent a lot of time there visiting Queen, and wrote a profile of the new city for *Macmillan's Magazine*, published in 1881 ("A Little Western Town"). When Queen moved to England for her health in

1887, her home at Ightham Mote, a medieval manor house in Kent, was frequented by Strettell, Sargent, Meredith, and other writers and artists. Strettell appears as one of the figures in Sargent's painting *A Game of Bowls, Ightham Mote, Kent* (1889).

In 1890 Strettell married the English painter Lawrence Alexander "Peter" Harrison (1866-1937), with whom she had three children. After her marriage, she continued to publish under her maiden name of Strettell. The couple, along with Peter's brother, Leonard Frederic "Ginx" Harrison, and members of the Palmer family, frequently travelled with Sargent. He painted two portraits of Alma: an oil sketch done by lamplight at her home circa 1889 and a watercolour done during one of their vacations in the Alps in 1905. She also appears in several group studies by Sargent, including *Isola Bella* (1902). Her 1897 volume of translations of Spanish & Italian Folk-Songs includes illustrations by Sargent and his friend Edwin Austin Abbey.

Strettell's contribution of over forty translations to *Selections from the Greek Anthology* (1889), edited by Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), helped establish her reputation as an accomplished literary translator. She is one of only five key translators named on the title page, along with Richard Garnett, Andrew Lang, Goldwin Smith, and W. M. Hardinge. Her translation from *Agathias* opens the volume.

In 1891 Strettell collaborated with Queen Elisabeth of Romania, who published widely under the name Carmen Sylva, to translate Elena Văcărescu's collection of Romanian folk songs into English. Some of these had been published in a German translation in 1889 by Sylva as *Lieder aus dem Dimbovitza*. The English selection, titled *Bard of the Dimbovitza*, was quite popular, leading to an expanded second series in 1894 and eight reprint editions before 1914. Many selections from the volume were set to music by composers such as Arnold Bax, Arthur Foote, and Charles Griffes.

Strettell's 1894 collection of *Lullabies of Many Lands* includes translations from Romanian, German, and Norwegian, and was designed with an ornamental cover and illustrations by Emily J. Harding. Strettell subsequently collaborated with Sylva on *Legends from River & Mountain* (1896), which contains English translations of several German folktales and legends along with ten stories originally published in Sylva's German-language collections of Romanian folktales.

In 1896 Strettell contributed four poems to *The Yellow Book*: "Rain" (Volume 8), "The Fishermen" (Volume 9), and "The Wind" (Volume 11), each translated from the works of Émile Verhaeren, and "A Soldier's Farewell" (Volume 11), from a Romanian folk song. She also published her translation of Verhaeren's "The Grave-Digger" in *The Fortnightly Review* in November 1896. These were followed in 1899 with her *Poems of Émile Verhaeren* (issued in an expanded second edition, 1915), which was the only major English translation of his poetry throughout the twentieth century.

Strettell's translations of the Provençal poetry of Frédéric Mistral, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1904, were published with the 1907 English translation of his *Memoirs* by Constance Elizabeth Maud.

Strettell translated a number of shorter lyrics that were set to music, including poems by Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire, as well as folk songs. Her translation of Ferdinand Hiller's hymn "Be Near Me Still" was frequently reprinted in collections of sacred music throughout the twentieth century. When her friend Ethel Smyth received a license in 1909 to stage her radical opera *The Wreckers*, which was composed in collaboration with H. B. Brewster, who wrote the libretto in French, Strettell translated some of his lyrics into English so that the audience could follow its complicated religious and moral debates.

Alma Strettell was an accomplished and widely published poetic translator whose work, like that of many other translators, deserves more critical attention than it has hitherto received.

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Selected Publications by Alma Strettell

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Elgar, Edward. *Yea, cast me from heights of the mountains: part-song; op. 45, no.1*. London: Novello, 1922.

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