



Susan Snow Lukesh

Agatha!

Agatha Snow Abroad: A Sketch Book from her
1912 European Tour

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Print ISBN: 978-1-64438-917-1

Epub ISBN: 978-1-64438-918-8

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64438-919-5

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Published by Susan S. Lukesh LLC.

www.susanslukeshllc.com

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lukesh, Susan

Agatha! Agatha Snow Abroad: A Sketch Book from her 1912 European Tour

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020915758

Printed on acid-free paper.

Susan S. Lukesh LLC

2020

Cover Image

Agatha, captioned "An Artist." From an early 20th c Snow family album of Kodak photos.

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Prologue

On the appointed day in early November 1911, Robert Snow Jr. and Oliver Prescott Jr. hid behind the black horsehair sofa in the parlor of Sarah Hunt Snow's house on Orchard Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts. The sofa was formal and uncomfortable to sit on but provided an excellent hiding place for two thirteen-year-old boys. Soon Arthur Willis Blackman was escorted into the parlor where he waited the arrival of Constance Snow, oldest child of Sarah Hunt Snow. Having secured her mother's approval, Arthur was there to propose marriage to Constance.

Oliver, who would later serve as lawyer for Sarah until her death, picks up the story, when he wrote in 1980 to Robert Snow's widow, shortly after Robert's death.¹⁸

Together we hid behind the huge sofa in the West portion of Mrs. Snow's sunny parlor upon which Arthur Blackman arrived with a bouquet of violets and was proposing to Constance Snow, all dressed up, pretty as a picture and flushed with excitement and then popped out at what we considered a psychological moment and shouted "Boo!"

Constance's daughter, my mother, would often tell the story of Agatha, younger sister of Constance, who took to her bedroom for a week after the proposal. Was she sulking because she wasn't getting the attention? Or was it because she imagined the attention that her older sister would get during the engagement and wedding? We have no way to know, although my mother came down firmly on the side of Agatha's no longer having what she thought was suitable attention. Oliver attests to Agatha's personality in his letter when he describes the family over a half century earlier:

I remember Agatha with artistic gifts, capabilities and a difficult personality; Edith - warm and with rather horrendous homeliness; and little black-clad Mrs. Snow - alive, wiry and high-strung - who used to call me at my office: "Oliver! This is your old trouble Mrs. Snow. I must see you!" Long ago and far away!

Ultimately the difficulties of living with Agatha forced Sarah to ask her to leave the family home and find her own place to live in New Bedford, from which she continued her work as an interior designer and decorator. Agatha was an artistic and bright yet difficult young woman; thinking of her today evokes *The Sound of Music*: "How to solve a problem like Maria?"

Indeed, how to solve this problem of Agatha after her sister's engagement? Focus Agatha on something that is hers and will consume her energy and time, leaving Constance to the world of engagement parties and plans for the wedding and her future married life with lawyer Blackman. And so, we surmise, a plan was hatched to send Agatha and companions to Europe for three months. From this problem and Agatha's artistic gifts, the small travel sketch book¹⁹ remains to assist in tracing the trip from mid-April to early August 1912 and show us her creativity, providing enjoyment and amusement, and education, well over a century later.

Epilogue

Now that we have followed Agatha and her companions through more than three months in Europe and attempted to answer the questions her images and comments provoke, it may have become clear to some readers that I have followed Thornton Wilder in his desire “to pile up a million details of daily living ... it is the business of writing to restore that sense of the whole.”¹ As an archaeologist myself, I concur in his opinion—drawn from his formative experience studying archaeology in Rome—of the archaeologist’s eyes:

An archaeologist’s eyes combine the view of the telescope with the view of the microscope.

He [or she] reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.²

As an archaeologist, I attempted to imagine past lives through what remains, taking seemingly mundane items—broken pieces of pottery—and proposed reconstructions of the lives of people thousands of years dead. And I suggest that this attempted reconstruction of Agatha’s 1912 European tour has taken seemingly small mundane items and events and worked to restore a sense of the whole. As indicated earlier, to restore a sense of the whole with facts such as train schedules and ocean crossings and knowledge of the families woven together with supposition and conjecture is a much easier job than singing the lives of prehistoric people (with no written records) out of the potsherds and stone foundations left behind. I suggest that these activities and my archaeological work imagines and assembles and reconstructs histories or past lives from the fragments we have been left. And this reconstruction of stories allows us to honor the dead and their lives.

As a teen-ager I was struck by a quote of Evgeny Evtushenko with which, even at that age, I profoundly disagreed, yet had no idea what course my own interests would take. I used Evtushenko’s words as an epigraph to a poem I composed from a story my grandmother had told me—a poem that was in direct contradiction to Evtushenko, who wrote “They perish. They cannot be brought back. The secret worlds are not regenerated.” I share that school-girl poem here, honoring my grandmother, Constance, who, after all, is the older sister of Agatha and whose engagement apparently caused the plan to send Agatha to Europe. I suggest that both a reconstruction of Agatha’s trip and, after Constance read a previous poem of mine now lost, her sharing the story of her father waking her in the middle of the night prove that, in some fashion, parts of previous lives can be brought back and parts of their worlds regenerated. So today, as a genealogist, I continue to work to regenerate parts of the worlds of the four centuries of my ancestors in this country.

¹ Wilder, 153.

² Wilder, 154.

My Mother's Mother

"We who knew our fathers
in everything, in nothing.

They perish. They cannot be brought back.
The secret worlds are not regenerated."

Evtushenko

Braced by an arm against the cherry desk,
Invincible, though old and stooped and deaf, she speaks.
She's young again with memories and thoughts:

*Asleep, my father gently bids me wake,
(Words and year are blackened spaces in my mind,
This moment though brought back by your poem.)
Now at the stair window I press my face
and see through wispy topaz clouds – chased
by windy phantoms – an Olympian,
autumnal moon. Below, across, above,
untamed geese, arrow-strict, divide the night.*

Her voice drops off, there's nothing left to show ...
The young girl ages swiftly and disappears.
The picture, though, inspired by my school-girl's poem,
is no longer hers alone,
and transmits a corner of her world to me,
an ungenetic immortality.