



“Book Review: *The Light Among Us*”

Reviewed by Kathy L. Brown



A fictionalization of the intriguing Elizabeth Carne

The Light Among Us explores the life and legacy of a forgotten pioneer in the struggle for women’s equality in the workplace, public education for all, and social justice.

Elizabeth Carne was a gifted intellect, geologist, artist, author, and businessperson who lived and worked in Victorian-era Cornwall. Never married, she inherited a bank and land holdings and administered them for the betterment of society and in keeping with the tenets of her Methodist upbringing. Her responsibilities were unusual for a woman at that time, and she faced much resistance.



As a child, Elizabeth Carne's father was her primary tutor, insisting on a rigorous education in a wide range of topics of particular interest to him as an amateur geologist and successful banker. After Elizabeth's brother's death, Carne deems his daughter the only viable option to take over the family bank and trained her up accordingly.

In some ways Carne's life is that of a typical, genteel Victorian-era spinster, making up baskets for the poor, adopting orphan relatives, attending church, and writing numerous letters. But in others, it is highly unusual as she takes on responsibilities such as assessing investments for her bank, inspecting trade ships for purchase, and traveling on geologic expeditions.

Carne's lifelong enthusiasm was the natural world and geology in particular. She loved the rugged Cornish coastline, and it shows in vivid & loving prose.

“The sea breeze and the roar and froth of the waves below were calming and comforting to me. I felt most at home here among the cliffs and granite formations...Gorse, chamomile, hemlock, and meadow saffron clung on to their stalks blowing in the wind about the rocks. Nothing in this world made me happier than these cliffs that looked as if a giant had taken an enormous spade or axe and hewn them along the coast like cutting a piece of cake.”

Carne was not shy about expressing her opinions in defense of others, yet always well-spoken, intelligent, and polite. She chose her words, whether written or oral, carefully and to maximum effect. When a privileged couple challenge her plan to establish and endow schools for poor children, Carne delivers a spirited defense of literacy and universal, compulsory, and free education.

“The room was silent. ‘Mr. and Mrs. Shackelworth, my endeavour is to offer education as a means of giving children better prospects in life. And in the Lord's eyes, no child is vulgar. We have heard your concerns. Now, I suggest you depart and let us move forward before it is much too little, too late.’”

Much like Carne herself, the book's voice is clear and well-spoken. The reader watches an engaging woman blaze a new trail even as she lives her life in service to others and her



family legacy. Yet, for all her groundbreaking accomplishments, Carne is above all a dutiful child. Her family's need for her to helm the family banking business supersedes any desire she might have to marry and have her own family or even pursue a career in science.

As her father explains, after she falls in love with a working class mine engineer, although their differing social classes is a problem, the bigger issue is that, given the responsibilities of a wife and mother, she wouldn't have the freedom to work as a banker. And the very real dangers of childbirth in the nineteenth century could well cut her life short before an heir to the family legacy came of age.

A detailed list of historical notes about the people, institutions, and events of Carne's time supplement the narrative and will be valuable to readers who wish to take a closer look at the Victorian era. The novel offers a sweeping view of the life of a true woman pioneer.

To maintain the first-person point of view and still convey relevant background information, Carne sometimes thinks and says things for the reader's benefit. This practice can interfere with the natural flow of the character's otherwise appealing voice.

Readers interested in natural science and social justice reform, as well as a little-known yet intriguing woman who led the way, are really going to enjoy this novel. The themes and issues of *The Light Among Us* bear serious thought and discussion—a great choice for a book club.