

Seeking the Sacred: Edward Elgar's *Caractacus* and Surpassing the Roman Empire

Róisín Blunnie

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Edward Elgar's substantial vocal-orchestral works for provincial choral festivals of the 1890s include *The Black Knight* (setting H. W. Longfellow's translation of Ludwig Uhland's *Der Schwarze Ritter* and premiered by the Worcester Festival Choral Society, 1893), *The Light of Life* (based on John 9, composed for the Three Choirs Festival at Worcester, 1896), *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf* (adapted from Longfellow's strophic rendition of the Norse tale, for the North Staffordshire Musical Festival, 1896), and *Caractacus* (for the Leeds Festival, 1898). The range of topics and literary source texts visited by Elgar—then little-known and at an early stage of his career—and the manner in which he and his librettists tailored them for musical setting, indicate a concerted effort, at this significant time in British imperial history, to seek broad appeal, and to achieve acceptance and acclamation in the all-important choral-festival world:

In the 1890s the primary objective of an English composer was still recognition through the commissioning and performance of major choral works, whether in London or in the provinces (Caldwell 1999, 258).

Festival performances required a certain type of musical composition. The subject of the work had to be suitable for the performance venue (whether cathedral or public hall), for the organisers, and for the respectable members of society in attendance, while the continued prevalence of Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in festival programmes gave some indication of audience—and choral society—preferences.

The Appeal of the Caractacus Story

Elgar's cantata *Caractacus* was his last work before the success and confidence that came with the "Enigma" Variations for orchestra (1899) and the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900). The story concerns the defeat of the eponymous British king by the Roman army in the first century CE, and his subsequent pardon in Rome by the Emperor Claudius.¹ The text was prepared by Elgar's Worcestershire neighbour, retired imperial civil servant Harry A. Acworth,² most likely from a combination of historical accounts by Tacitus and Dio Cassius, and contemporary general histories or local lore (Anderson and Moore 1985; McGuire 2007). There are several reasons why Elgar may have chosen to set the story of Caractacus, one being the presence of Druids as a prominent feature (it is the betrayal of Caractacus by an Arch-Druid that precipitates the British defeat, and Druidism dominates much of the action of the cantata's early scenes, as discussed in McGuire 2007). Druidism was popular in various literary forms in nineteenth-century Britain: in an extensive survey of the topic, Hutton notes that Druids were 'fully established as the leading and representative figures of the earliest British past', and 'featured as major players in any interpretation of that past, in English works of history, literature, art and theology' (Hutton 2009, 210), and draws particular attention to William Wordsworth, 'one of the leading British poets of all time and the one who wrote most often about Druids' (183), to the politician and poet Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 'who dealt with the Druids in his epic poem on King Arthur, published in 1849' (214) and to Tennyson, who wrote his poem 'The Druid's Prophecies' in 1827 for a competition at the University of Cambridge for 'the best poem on the Druids submitted by an undergraduate' (211), while Bellini's opera *Norma*

¹ A scene made famous by Francis Hayman's drawing *The Noble Behaviour of Caractacus, Before Emperor Claudius of Rome* (1751, and widely copied thereafter).

² Acworth had held various posts in the imperial civil service in India, ending his career as Municipal Commissioner of Bombay (1890–1895) before retiring to Worcester. For detailed information about Acworth, see McGuire 2007.

(staged at Covent Garden every year throughout the mid-nineteenth century) provides a further popular instance (Smiles 1994, 108; Rushton 2012). Thus, a topic appealing to the public fascination with Druidism may have seemed a wise choice for Elgar. A more compelling reason for the decision, however, lies in the self-view of nineteenth-century imperial Britain and its relationship to an ancient counterpart.

The construction of a link with ancient society is, according to Smiles, ‘a process of self-validation’, in which ‘present concerns are projected into the past to produce the desired image of antiquity’ (Smiles 1994, 2). Vance outlines the Victorian (and universal) tendency to admire and seek to emulate ancient ideals:

Like everybody else, the Victorians tried to make sense of themselves and their own times by looking at other epochs and constructing patterns of similarity and difference (Vance 1997, vi).

In the case of Victorian Britain, one epoch in particular appealed for this purpose of identification and comparison: that of ancient Rome: ‘In politics, in war and in civil engineering, as well as in literature, there was a widespread sense of ultimate connection with Rome’ (Vance 1997, vi). Riley asserts that Rome was viewed as an imperial model for British society particularly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century:

Ever since Disraeli had persuaded Parliament in 1876 to confer the title Empress of India on Queen Victoria, Britain had become consciously imperialist, and naturally looked to ancient Rome as an example, both in attitude and language (Riley 2007, 164).

The availability of its literature allowed an image of the Roman Empire to come to life in the minds of a wide range of nineteenth-century British readers:

In the course of the nineteenth century readers of modest classical attainment or none had available to them an increasing number of contemporary or reprinted translations in verse and prose (Vance 1997, viii).

Classical texts appeared in part or in full in series designed to bring the literature of Rome to Victorian readers of all kinds, resulting in a widespread awareness of the genre and the era:

Some of the most important elementary introductions, incorporating translated passages and extensive paraphrasing or summary of classical texts, appeared in William Blackwood's series of *Ancient Classics for English Readers* (1870–1932), intended particularly for ladies who were not normally taught much Latin (Vance 1997, viii).

Theatrical manifestations of Roman culture also aided the retrospective imagination of the ancient empire, not only for the Victorian public, but for writers dealing with the topic:

Shakespeare's Roman plays in performance, particularly with elaborate sets and costumes, helped the general public to visualize Roman life and provided novelists dealing with ancient Rome [...] with a convenient reference point. *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* in particular had enjoyed renewed success in the nineteenth-century theatre and supplied Victorian readers and writers with models of imaginative realization and dramatic structure (Vance 1997, 209).

Although, from the British perspective, Rome is the enemy in *Caractacus*, the cantata nevertheless presents much to admire about the ancient empire, as both Acworth's text and Elgar's music seem at times to celebrate Roman traits. The majesty and splendour of the imperial power is depicted, for example, in the glittering welcome for Rome's victorious soldiers in Acworth's text for the cantata's final scene:

Over the marble palace,
Over the golden shrine,
O'er street and square and forum
Glaring, the noon-beams shine;

Widely the robes are waving,
Brightly the jewels glance,
Eager the eyes that lighten
Each joyous countenance.

The music too, forgoes at this point any sense of Rome as the enemy, instead extolling the might and triumph of the ancient empire with an instrumental (Example 1) and then choral (Example 2) statement of power and unity in C major:

Example 1: Scene VI,
‘The March Triumphal Thunders’,
opening bars



Example 2: Scene VI,
Rehearsal Number (RN) 17

The march tri-umph - al thun - ders

Importantly for Elgar’s late-Victorian audience, the libretto has Caractacus referring to ‘order, and law, and liberty’ as characteristics of the imperial power, and the magnanimous emperor Claudius, affected by the dignity and intrepidity of the defeated king, grants his pardon:

Dwell here in Rome, and by the Emperor’s side
Find safety, peace, and rest for ever more.

The imperial power thus dispenses clemency, harmony is achieved between the conquering and the conquered, and a four-bar interlude leads to the cantata’s epilogue. As Vance states with regard to the Caractacus story in general, the protagonist

provided late-Victorian Britain with a means of bridging the political and imaginative gulf between coloniser and colonised, conquest and freedom. He helped the British public to accommodate latter-day British colonialism. Although he already existed, it was necessary to reinvent him. He assuaged colonial guilt,

since Britain could be magnanimous as Claudius had been and could think of itself as committed to establishing peace (Vance 2000, 142).

Matthew Riley argues, in relation both to *Caractacus* and a comparable situation in the 1896 cantata *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf*, that distance in time between the scene of the action and the contemporary audience allowed a nuanced view of empire to prevail: ‘the cloak of antiquity means that Elgar does not have to eliminate all complexity from the relationships between coloniser and colonised’ (Riley 2007, 154). As Riley notes, the delineation of superior and inferior is not always entirely clear in these works, ‘the distinction between self and other is blurred’ (155), as elements of each may be heard, admired, or criticised in turn:

Unlike [Elgar’s] masque *The Crown of India* (1912), it is not a prerequisite here that the expansionist power should be eulogised without qualification. The colonised party may be given a chance to speak. In this way, competing concepts of national identity in the late-Victorian period are personified and made to interact in a drama (Riley 2007, 154).

Perhaps this duality of allegiance, this ability to identify alternately or even simultaneously with both sides in the power relationship, was workable in these culturally significant cantatas of the mid-to-late 1890s precisely because of the British self-view as outlined by Vance: ‘Late Victorians, particularly in the north of England, liked to see themselves as they saw the Romans, as successful engineers and efficient rulers (Vance 1997, 198). Referring to the finale of *Caractacus*, which abandons the ancient timeframe and adopts a late nineteenth-century perspective, Riley summarises the cantata’s message that Britain is the superior successor of Rome:

Today the work is best remembered for its jingoistic final chorus, which assures the audience that, despite their defeat, the British will take up the Roman mantle and build an even greater empire, one based on the ‘order, law and liberty’ that *Caractacus* urges the emperor to teach his people (Riley 2007, 160).

Despite the apparent admiration for Rome in the Caractacus story, and the resultant complexity to which Riley refers, however, the cantata establishes a fundamental difference between the respective empires of Rome and Britain, and here we arrive to the key point of this paper: in a work primarily concerning a pagan king in a pre-Christianised Britain, Elgar and Acworth manage to incorporate, at least implicitly, the idea that the nineteenth-century British Empire eclipsed its ancient Roman equivalent not only because it was more humane, more benevolent, more enlightened, more just and more improving, but because it was divinely endorsed: it had the Christian God on its side.

The Victorian Hero and Dignity in Defeat

A celebrated feature of British heroism in the nineteenth century was the maintenance of dignity in defeat, as displayed for example by muscular Christian champions Hedley Vicars at Sevastopol (1855), Henry Havelock at Lucknow (1857) and perhaps most famously, General Charles Gordon at Khartoum (1885). Caractacus's nobility and humanity are carefully set out by Acworth and Elgar in the Lament that closes the cantata's Scene IV, where the defeated king seems imbued with the Christian characteristics associated with his nation and its heroes. Here, Caractacus calls on his slain soldiers to bear witness to his conduct as military leader:

O my warriors, tell me truly,
O'er the red graves where ye lie,
That your monarch led you duly,
First to charge and last to fly:

Speak, ah speak, beloved voices,
From the chambers where ye feast,
Where the war god stern rejoices
That his host has been increas'd.

The king's concern and fondness for his charges, his steadfastness in strife, and his focus on community over personal gain are strongly emphasised in Acworth's libretto. Elgar further

underlines the Lament, and consequently the admirable Christian attributes of Caractacus portrayed therein, by setting this section in 7/4 time, a highly unusual move and unique in his early choral works. Holloway regards the Lament as ‘one of the score’s manifest high points’, and draws attention to the consequence of Elgar’s unusual setting: ‘It transforms the regular four-beat clunk of Acworth’s text [...] into a supple 7/4 (3+2+2)’ (Holloway 2004, 77). According to Holloway, the composer’s decision here succeeds in creating a nuanced sense of dignity and nobility out of four-square poetry:

Elgar’s effecting this by play of regular and irregular shows high rhetorical art, but what strikes one is how effortless and uneccentric the rhythm is: everything moves with natural eloquence, the very accents of dignified public elegy (Holloway 2004, 77–78).

It is undoubtedly a striking section of the work, and has the air of a carefully considered compositional decision: Elgar fashions a radically different rhythmic effect to that suggested by Acworth’s trochaic metre. In doing so, the composer repeats selected phrases of text that contribute to the scene’s promotion of noble bravery, of magnanimous muscular Christianity. After the first four lines of the Lament, the words ‘O my warriors!’ are repeated passionately, with the baritone Caractacus leaping to and descending from a high ‘G’ and Elgar avoiding bald statements of power by eschewing root-positioning chords almost entirely at this point:

*Example 3: Scene IV, ‘Lament’,
5 after RN 24*

The image shows a musical score for the phrase 'O my warriors!'. It consists of three staves: a vocal line in bass clef, a piano accompaniment in treble clef, and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The key signature is two sharps (D major). The vocal line features a melodic line with a high note on 'G' and a descending line. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern with chords and a dynamic marking of *f*. Below the piano accompaniment, there are fingering numbers: 6, 7, 6, 6, 2, 6.

This judicious setting of the repeated words accentuates the king's care for his troops and his personal grief at their demise, which appear to take precedence over the fact of defeat in battle. The chorus, at this point occupying an unspecified dramatic role, echoes the king's mourning, gently lamenting the British dead in a manner that avoids 5/3 chords entirely until the *pianissimo* phrase ending (Example 4), where the effect is further softened, even personalised, by the absence of chordal accompaniment, leaving only a bare 'D' in the low strings before moving into a series of modulations:

Example 4: Scene IV, 'Lament', 3 before RN 25

The musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves are vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) with lyrics: "O ye war - riors, dead war - ri-ors,". The fifth staff is the piano accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*, *pp*, and *ppp*. The piano part features triplets and fingerings: 6 4 2, 6 5, 6 5 3 2, and 6 4 3.

Typical Christian characteristics are ascribed by Acworth and Elgar to the person of the pagan Caractacus throughout the cantata and particularly in this fourth scene. However, the work's implicit endorsement of Christianity is not confined to the king. The text and the musical

treatment of the Lament appear to indicate that Caractacus's dead warriors will be rewarded in heaven for their sacrifice. Though ostensibly referring to 'the war god' (with a small 'g') mentioned moments before, the final lines of the king's Lament suggest salvation and immortality (2 after RN 27):

And the god shall give you heeding,
And across the heav'nly plain,
He shall smile and see me leading
My dead warriors once again.

The reference to an afterlife here could be regarded as both immediate and prophetic, as Elgar's stately setting hints at glories to come for British military heroes. At this point in the text, a significant change may be noted in the vocal writing. From the opening of the Lament, the chorus provides a gentle answering or reinforcing of the soloist's sentiments in an almost undeviating homophonic texture, as if joining together in mourning for the British dead, calling to them with fondness and a collective sense of loss. A marked change occurs, however, as the king sings these closing lines. A new resolve may be felt as the chorus moves to a more determined (though still quiet) dotted rhythm and a quasi-antiphonal polyphonic texture, based on the pairing of men's voices and women's voices respectively. Here, under the king's *fortissimo* statement that 'the god shall give you heeding/And across the heav'nly plain/He shall smile, and see me leading' (3 after RN 27), the choral reiteration takes on a new character, a growing confidence. With ascending sequential melodic patterns in all voices and *divisi* in the women's, set against descending scales in the bass instruments, the texture, and with it the sentiment, broadens as we arrive, via an emotion-filled *ritenuto*, to the king's prophetic 'My dead warriors once again' (just before RN 28). After the dignified, human focus of the Lament, the climax of the section occurs with the baritone solo again leaping to a high 'G', as the king foresees the afterlife of his lost British men:

Example 5: Scene IV, 'Lament', 2 before RN 28

He shall smile, ___ and see me lead- ing ___ my dead war-riors once a - gain! ___

The choir maintains the powerful moment with a sudden swell to *fortissimo* on the words ‘the King heroic leading’ (RN 28), accompanied by brass instruments, which here come forth in the texture for the first time in this most unmilitary recounting of military action. The repeated interjections of the chorus throughout the Lament, gently but persistently calling on the dead warriors to ‘speak, ah speak’ from beyond their graves, from the land of plenty where they now feast, underline the double meaning of the afterlife, so strongly promoted in this scene: that of the dead soldiers of Caractacus’ time, sure to be rewarded for their sacrifice, and that of the nineteenth-century empire, when British warriors would again be led into battle.

General Gordon and the Rise of Ideological Anxieties

Acworth’s construction of the character of Caractacus and Elgar’s deliberately emphatic setting of the Scene IV Lament thus suggest an attempt to recast their protagonist as a type of Christian hero beloved of the Victorian public, a hero—albeit defeated—emblematic of the increasingly complex imperial context of the late 1890s. Berenson outlines the selfless Christian characteristics of the most famous of these fallen but enduring objects of public affection:

Like Havelock, Gordon distinguished himself as a pious Christian soldier. Both appeared to be modest, self-effacing men more interested in serving others than in earning fame and fortune for themselves (Berenson 2011, 88).

Gordon (or at least the story of Gordon) in particular served as a popular embodiment of British imperial sentiment at the *fin de siècle*, when the public’s need to perceive imperial expansion as a moral duty was at its zenith. Intense colonial rivalry, particularly in Africa, combined with the

constant threat of a major clash of European powers and defeats such as the Jameson fiasco of 1895–96 had brought colonial affairs front and centre in British public consciousness, eliciting a collective British imperial anxiety and an upsurge of patriotic feeling. The death and subsequent mass glorification of Gordon had had a monumental effect on the state of British popular imperialist ideology:

Imperialists dated ‘the Great Awakening’ to the years just after the death of General Gordon in Khartoum in 1885, when they believed the nation arose from its lethargy to accept its moral destiny (MacDonald 1994, 4).

The story of Gordon, then, is directly linked to the rise of popular imperialism in the late nineteenth century, a time when the British people looked to their heroes for inspiration, moral justification, and ideal representations of national identity. MacDonald notes the importance of Gordon as an imperial hero not only of his own time, but for decades after:

There was one hero above all others for the late Victorians and Edwardians, whose story was not only inspirational, but whose life seemed to answer most of the moral ambiguities in the imperial programme. This hero was General Charles Gordon (MacDonald 1994, 83).

Part of Gordon’s wide appeal seems to have rested on the fact that he was both a military aggressor and a devoted Christian: a man of war and a man of peace, and a striking real-life parallel for the remodelled Caractacus:

In his person Gordon carried—and as symbol sought to resolve—the tension between evangelical morality and military spirit; he could be all things to all men: a saint to the pious, a man betrayed to the jingo. To both moralist and patriot his example was an answer to a society that did not always agree that what it was doing was right (MacDonald 1994, 83).³

Fin-de-siècle imperial ideologies seemed to coalesce around the figure of General Gordon, as the aforementioned external threats to British economic and military prowess left the public in need of a reassuring self-image.

³ It is known that Gordon was on Elgar’s mind around this time: he considered writing a ‘Gordon’ symphony, as is clear from letters to A.J. Jaeger of Novellos and F.G. Edwards of the *Musical Times* in late 1898. See Moore 1987.

‘For All the World Shall Learn It’: A Morally Superior Empire

In this context of heightened patriotic feeling and Christian mission, the most striking didactic feature of Elgar and Acworth’s *Caractacus*, the standalone final chorus, comes to the fore. Having accentuated the gallant behaviour and Christ-like selflessness of Caractacus and alluded to an afterlife for his defeated soldiers, the work’s Victorian creators draw their conclusion with ‘The Clang of Arms is Over’, in which the cantata leaves Rome and the defeated yet dignified Caractacus behind in the key of C minor, progresses through D-flat major and D major to arrive in E-flat major, where it establishes itself firmly in late nineteenth-century Britain:

The clang of arms is over,
Abide in peace, and brood
On splendid ages coming,
And Kings of British blood.

The light descends from heaven,
The centuries roll away.
The empire of the Roman,
Is crumbled into clay.

The eagle’s flight is ended,
His weary wings are furl’d,
The oak has grown and shadow’d
The shores of all the world.⁴

Not only does the concluding chorus bring the British Empire to the fore, but with the reference to and placing of light from heaven, and the musical treatment thereof, Elgar and Acworth seem quite deliberately to set the new empire in the Christian era, the enlightened era, with God on the side of the glorious. Elgar gives considerable musical prominence to this idea: the opening lines of the chorus are sung in unison in C minor, with all parts ascending by diatonic step from the opening C to G a fifth higher, from where the voices burst into an accented five-part C-major chord on the word ‘heaven’.

⁴ The eagle represents Rome; the oak, Britain. Both symbols were widely used in nineteenth-century literature.

Example 6: 'The Clang of Arms is Over', RN 51

The light de - scends from hea - ven, _____

Subsequent verses of this closing chorus put forward with confidence the resolute but altruistic destiny of the British Empire:

And ever your dominion
From age to age shall grow
O'er peoples undiscover'd,
In lands we cannot know;

And where the flag of Britain
Its triple crosses rears,
No slave shall be for subject,
No trophy wet with tears.

But folk shall bless the banner,
And bless the crosses twin'd,
That bear the gift of freedom,
On ev'ry blowing wind;

Nor shall her might diminish
While firm she holds the faith
Of equal law to all men
And holds it to the death.

For all the world shall learn it,
Though long the task shall be,
The text of Britain's teaching,
The message of the free.

And when at last they find it,
The nations all shall stand
And hymn the praise of Britain,
Like brothers hand in hand.

Acworth and Elgar thus juxtapose the benevolent ideals of empire and the will of God, in a tone reminiscent of Kipling, whose ‘A Song of the English’ (from a collection called *The Seven Seas*, 1896) states plainly that the path of British imperial expansion was prepared by God:

Fair is our lot – O goodly is our heritage!
(Humble ye, my people, and be fearful in your mirth!)
For the Lord our God Most High
He hath made the deep as dry,
He hath smote for us a pathway to the ends of all the Earth!

While the language here is more explicit than Acworth’s libretto (though perhaps not Elgar’s setting thereof), MacDonald’s analysis of Kipling’s verse could equally be applied to *Caractacus*: ‘If these lines are inspected for their ideological content, they reveal powerful imperial claims. England’s lot is good, and her world Empire is sanctified by God’ (MacDonald 1994, 153). A similar confidence in relating divine will to British conquest is evident in other nineteenth-century literary contexts, such as the hugely popular adventure literature genre. In Chapter 5 of Henry Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, for example, as the protagonists prepare to march into the desert en route to the mines, they pause, and Sir Henry Curtis addresses his companions:

‘Gentlemen’, said Sir Henry presently, in his low, deep voice, ‘we are going on about as strange a journey as men can make in this world. It is very doubtful if we can succeed in it. But we are three men who will stand together for good or for evil to the last. And now before we start let us for a moment pray to the Power who shapes the destinies of men, and who ages since has marked out our paths, that it may please Him to direct our steps in accordance with His will’ (Haggard, 1885, 49–50).

It may be significant that as the action of the cantata arrives to the nineteenth-century British Empire, the key of E-flat major is reached (2 before RN 52). This key is associated quite

history will nonetheless look more favourably on the heroic British king and on the glorious modern empire. Nowhere, however, does Ross refer to God, or to a Christian basis for imperial superiority. For the Leeds Festival of 1898, at a time of sharply rising imperial uncertainty and insecurity, just a year before illusions of British invincibility were shattered by the Boer War, as high-profile losses became more publicly meaningful, and as other imperial powers grew in industrial strength, naval capability, and global influence, Elgar and Acworth felt it appropriate to align creatively with the perspective shared by Kipling, who ‘saw the duty of civilizing the world as a burden laid on the nation by God’ (Richards 2001, 54). Elgar and Acworth’s *Caractacus*, with its retrospectively Christianised hero and its allusion to divine endorsement for imperial expansion, suggests either that its creators subscribed to the same view, or that they believed this view served as a comforting sentiment for their choral-festival audience. It is not clear from the substantial surviving documentary evidence whether Elgar himself was or was not imperialist in outlook,⁶ and the question is perhaps of little consequence here. It is clear, however, that he sought, at this crucial point in his career, to access the cultural pulse of the British musical public, a public immersed in the culture of empire, and to give them the carefully crafted image of empire that they wished to see.

⁶ Acworth, of course, had spent his entire career in the service of the Empire in India; and his writings show that he believed firmly in the civilising benevolence of the British Empire. See Acworth 1891.

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