



The Complete Poetical Works Of James Whitcomb Riley

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Few lives have left so vivid an impression upon a native environment as that of James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier Poet. His folksy, down-home rhymes are still enormously popular in his native state and beyond. This publication brings back into print the complete Riley repertoire of more than 1,000 poems, including such all-time favorites as "Little Orphant Annie" (far and away the best-loved of all Riley characters), "The Raggedy Man," "Our Hired Girl," "A Barefoot Boy," "The Bumblebee," "Granny," and "When the Frost Is on the Punkin."

It is said that Indiana's best-known poet did not portray but invented the typical Hoosier. Applying imaginative skill, Riley altered and adapted the people around him to suit his purpose. As Jeannette Covert Nolan once put it, the figure who emerged was "a mellow, humorous rustic, a quaint, bucolic philosopher, unlettered but gifted with an earthy shrewdness, a peasant wisdom, a heart of gold, speaking a drawling, hybrid tongue, a dubious dialect as yet unidentified by any philologist."

In his heyday Riley was famous all over the world. Though often called a children's poet, he actually wrote about children for adults, delighting in emotional reminders of an irretrievable past -- perhaps one that never quite existed. Throughout his life Riley looked back wistfully and sentimentally upon his childhood days, turning the longings and unfulfilled dreams of youth into verse. So celebrated was he in Indiana that in many public elementary schools, students were required to memorize and recite one of his poems every week for admiring audiences of visiting parents.

If I Knew What Poets Know

If I knew what poets know, Did I know what poets do, If I knew what poets know,
Would I write a rhyme? Would I sing a song, I would find a theme
Of the buds that never blow Sadder than the pigeon's coo Sweeter than the placid flow
In the summer-time? When the days are long? Of the fairest dream:
Would I sing of golden seeds Where I found a heart in pain, I would sing of love that lives
Springing up in ironweeds? I would make it glad again; On the errors it forgives:
And of rain-drop turned to snow, And the false should be the true, And the world would better grow
If I knew what poets know? Did I know what poets do. If I knew what poets know.
-- James Whitcomb Riley



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