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COMMEMORATIVE TRIBUTE TO
MES WHITCOMB RILEY

By HAMLIN GARLAND

READ IN
THE 1920 LECTURE SERIES OF
THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
ARTS AND LETTERS



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
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New York

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<p style="text-align: center;">JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BY HAMLIN GARLAND</p> <p>One day in 1885, while calling upon my friend Charles E. Hurd, the Literary Editor of the <i>Boston Transcript</i>, I noticed upon his desk a curious little volume bound in parchment entitled <i>The Old Swimmin' Hole and 'Leven More Poems</i>, by Benjamin F. Johnson of Boone.</p> <p>Hurd, observing my interest, handed the book to me, saying, "Here is a man you should be interested in. He comes from out your way."</p> <p>This was my introduction to "The Hoosier Poet." I read in this booklet <i>When the Frost is on the Punkin</i>, <i>My Fiddle</i>, and other of the pieces</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">ACADEMY NOTES</p>	

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which later became familiar through Riley's readings on the platform, and I tasted in them a homely flavor which no other American poet had given me. I became almost at once an advocate of the man and the book. I wrote to the author and thereafter read every line of his writings so far as I could obtain them. I felt that in James Whitcomb Riley America had a writer who voiced as no one else had voiced the outlook of the Middle Western farmer.

Year by year Riley grew in reputation and appeal. He published *Afterwhiles*, *Pipes o' Pan*, and other volumes of mingled verse and prose, partly in the Hoosier vernacular, partly in an English which was touched with the same quaint, individual quality. The magazines soon began to publish his poems, but in truth his success did not come so much in print as through his own reading of his lines from the platform. He had in him something

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of the minstrel. He possessed notable power to charm and move an audience, and everywhere he spoke he left a throng of friends. To hear him read—or recite—*A Song of the Airly Days* was to be moved in a new and unforgettable way. His vibrant individual voice, his flexile lips, his droll glance, united to make him at once poet and comedian—comedian in the sense which makes for tears as well as for laughter.

Year by year his popularity increased, until his royalties surpassed those of even the greatest of American novelists. He appealed with singular power to the people of his own State, but he also appealed to the readers in Eastern States. He expressed something of the wistful sadness of the middle-aged man who is looking back on the sunlit streams of his boyhood, and he voiced also with notable fidelity the emotions of children in the

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wonder-world of the present. In all this work of the homely American Hoosier type his pen was adequate. He was recognized at last as the chief singer in the rural vernacular.

In 1892 I visited Riley at his native town of Greenfield, Indiana, and the town and country gave moving evidence of the wonder-working power of the poet. To my eyes it was the most unpromising field for art, especially for the art of verse. The landscape had no hills, no lakes, no streams of any movement or beauty. Ragged fence-rows, flat and dusty roads, fields of wheat alternating with clumps of trees—these were the features of a country which to me was utterly commonplace—and yet from this dusty, drab, unpromising environment Riley had been able to draw the honey of woodland poesy, a sweet in which a native fragrance as of basswood and buckwheat bloom mingled with hints

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of an English meadow and the tang
of a Canada thistle.

In person Riley was as markedly individual as his verse. He was short, square-shouldered, and very blond, with a head which he was accustomed to speak of as "of the tack-hammer variety." His smoothly shaven face was large and extremely expressive, the face of a great actor. Though grim in repose it lighted up with the merriest smiles as he read or as he uttered some quaint jest. His diction when he wished it to be so was admirably clear and precise, but he loved to drop into the speech and drawl of his Hoosier characters, and to me this was a never-failing delight. I have never met a man save Mark Twain who had the same amazing flow of quaint conceits. He spoke "copy" all the time.

In his own proper person he was wise rather than learned. His speech had the charm of the proverb, the sen-

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tentiousness of the homespun philosopher. Once he said to me, "I don't take no credit fer my ignorance—jest born that-a-way." At another time he remarked with a touch of mysticism, "My work did itself. I'm only the willer bark through which the whistle comes."

His dialect verse is written in two ways, one in the fashion of the man of little schooling who is expressing himself on paper, and the other, as the same man (or his neighbor) might express in actual speech the feeling which impelled him to utterance. In each case the expression is indirect, for Americans of his type are careful not to "slop over," as they call it. As Riley himself says, "I never represent people as the scholar thinks they *ought* to think and feel,—I never try to edit nature. Nature is good enough fer God, it's good enough fer me."

As he drew towards old age his

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health failed and the quality of his work declined in value. He repeated himself as Bret Harte did, and when he tried imaginative or formal verse he often failed. His genius was for the homely, the quaint, the pathetic, and his best expression was the vernacular. It was in poems like *Nothin' at All to Say* and *Griggsby's Station* that he won his fame, and not in fanciful pieces like *The Flying Islands of the Night*. There are a hundred American poets who can write conventional sonnets, there are very few who can catch the charm that is in *Kingry's Mill* and *Down Around the River*.

Others get the phonetics of everyday speech, but Riley *thought* in dialect. Common speech is the bones of his verse. It cannot be translated. It is not, of course, actual speech, but it suggests it, epitomizes it. No one else has ever caught more deftly the lisp

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and stammer of childhood. Eugene Field wrote about children, Riley dramatized them. In all that he wrote he retained his individuality—even in his more conventional verse he was never without his own savor.

He taught us once again the fundamental truth which we were long in learning here in America, that there is a poetry of common things as well as of epic deeds. His immense success with the common, non-literary public is to be counted for him and not against him. Either consciously or unconsciously his verses were wrought for the family. He never forced the erotic note. Surrounded by Americans, he wrote for Americans. To me his restraint is a fine and true distinction.

His verse sprang from a certain era of Mid-western development. It is a humble crop gathered from the corners of rail fences, from the vines

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which clamber upon the porches of small villages, and from the weedy side-walks of quiet towns far from the great markets of the world. For the people who are his kindred Riley was a spokesman, and his verses will not die so long as those of us who came up through the same lanes and by-ways live in the golden memories of the "Airly Days." The poets of to-day are writing of a different America, varying their accent to meet the demands of their day, and this is their privilege and their duty, but in the midst of the tumult of "the New America" I take pleasure in paying tribute to a man who did so much to embody a world that is gone.

As he said of his brother, so I say of him:

With a cheery word and a wave of the
hand

He has wandered into a foreign land—
He is not dead, he is just away!

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