

1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 23 — Riley, James Whitcomb



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RILEY, JAMES WHITCOMB (1853–), American poet, was born in Greenfield, Indiana, in 1853. He spent several years as an itinerant, sign-painter, actor and musician. During this vagabond experience he had opportunities to revise plays and compose songs, and was brought into close touch with the rural folk of Indiana, becoming familiar with their life and speech. About 1873 he first contributed verses, especially in the Hoosier dialect, to the papers, and he soon became local editor of the Anderson (Ind.) *Democrat*. In August 1877, over the initials “ E.A.P.,” he printed in the Kokomo (Indiana) *Dispatch* a poem, *Leonainie*, in the manner of Poe.^[1] The press throughout the country copied the poem, and many critics of acknowledged authority believed it to have been actually written by Poe, until the hoax was explained by the paper in which it first appeared. To the Indianapolis *Daily Journal* Riley contributed many poems, the best known being a series in dialect which purported to have been written by one “ Benjamin F. Johnson, of Boone,” a farmer. These he published in book form, under the same pen-name, as *The Old Swimmin' Hole* and *'Leven More Poems* (1883). He wrote short stories and sketches, some of unusual merit, but is known almost exclusively as a poet. Of his poems some are in conventional English, many others in the Hoosier dialect of the Middle-West. His materials are the homely incidents and aspects of village and country life, especially of Indiana, and his manner is marked by delicate imagination and naive humour and tenderness.

The bulk of his work appeared in *The Boss Girl and Other Sketches* (1886), republished in 1891 as *Sketches in Prose*; *Afterwhiles* (1887); *Pipes o' Pan at Zekesbury* (1888); *Rhymes of Childhood* (1890); *Neighborly Poems* (1891); *The Flying Islands of the Night* (1891), a fantastic blank verse drama; *Green Fields and Running Brooks* (1892); *Poems Here at Home* (189); *Armazindy* (1894), which contains the poem "Leonainie"; *A Child-World* (1896), reminiscent of his own boyhood; *The Rubdiyát of Doc Sifers* (1897); *Home Folks* (1900); *The Book of Joyous Children* (1902); *His Pa's Romance* (1903); *A Defective Santa Claus* (1904); and in several books of selections, such as *Old Fashioned Roses* (1889), published in England; *Child Rhymes* (1898); *Love Lyrics* (1899); *The Golden Year* (1899), published in England; *Farm Rhymes* (1901); *An Old Sweetheart of Mine* (1902); *Out to Old Aunt Mary's* (1904); *Songs o' Cheer* (1905); *Morning* (1907); and *Songs of Summer* (1908).

1. ↑ The poem was accompanied by a statement from the editor of the paper that it was "from the gifted pen of the erratic poet, Edgar Allan Poe," and by a circumstantial story to the effect that the poem had been found written on the fly-leaf of an old Latin-English dictionary then owned by "an uneducated and illiterate man" in Kokomo, who had received it from his grandfather, in whose tavern, near Richmond, Va., it had been left by "a young man who showed plainly the marks of dissipation."

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