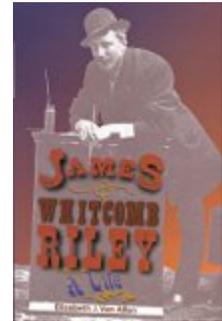


H-Net Reviews

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Elizabeth J. Van Allen. *James Whitcomb Riley, A Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. xii + 271 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33591-3.

Reviewed by George T. Blakey (Professor of History, Indiana University East)
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<i>James Whitcomb Riley, A Life</i>

On the sesquicentennial of his birth, Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley seemed to merit a fresh assessment. Historian Van Allen undertook that task and has produced a thorough biography that should supplant all previous attempts to understand the man. She contends that Riley has long been shrouded in legends that place him somewhere between sainthood and caricature, and that this book is an attempt to “describe the real man and to dispel the many myths.” (p.xi) The man who emerges from her diligent research and analysis is a gifted and flawed person whose ambitions exceeded his talents and whose popularity brought him more acclaim than happiness.

At the time of his death in 1916, Riley had reached several pinnacles seldom achieved by writers. His fame and wealth had come from his craft, that of a wordsmith. Public schools in Indiana honored his birthday with readings from his poetry; film and recordings preserved his image and voice; products from cigars to canned foods bore his endorsement. His body now rests in the highest point in Indianapolis, and a hospital and summer camp perpetuate his memory. Van Allen maintains that Riley achieved this level of celebrity by dogged determination and skill. He sought both celebrity and wealth and attained them with a genius for writing poems that his audience wanted, and marketing himself with an equal amount of genius. He and his work symbolized the shift in America from a bucolic rural life to an industrial urban one.

This was an awkward shift, burdened with nostalgia

for an earlier more innocent time. Riley captured and manipulated that nostalgia with such poems as “The Old Swimmin’ Hole” and “Little Orphant Annie.” His audience remembered and romanticized that golden past and made him the champion of those memories, no matter how selective and artificial they might have been.

Van Allen makes a good case that many of Riley’s strengths and weaknesses came from family influences. His reverence for his mother who died while he was still young led to an idealization of womanhood, a situation that was partly responsible for his lifelong bachelorhood. Riley had several serious relationships and at least two fianc=Es, but no female could fill his unrealistic expectations. His father also shaped much of Riley’s adult behavior. He had been a lawyer and state representative but a distant and demanding parent. The younger Riley emulated his father’s oratorical skills, but felt he could never win parental approval for his career choices. From this might have sprung his continuing self-doubts, depression and serious drinking problems. His unrequited search for a family was manifested in the emotional and financial support he lavished on relatives and the home he rented from the Holsteins on Lockerbie Street in Indianapolis.

Literary critics have traditionally questioned the merits of Riley’s work, regardless of its popularity. Riley often agreed that his poems lacked seriousness and depth, but he argued that the public would not permit him to ruminate on the dark or complex side of life. Van Allen is more of an historian than a literary critic, but she, too,

concludes that his work did not aspire to great substance or originality. "None of his works penetrate below the surface of any issues of social gravity, and the emotional range of his poetry is relatively narrow." (p. 268) Critics also debated about the authenticity of dialect in Riley's verse, some complaining that it did not replicate nineteenth century Indiana speech patterns. This has ceased to be a relevant debate to most Hoosiers today, and Van Allen does not get involved in the old controversy.

Historians are obliged to create context for their readers, to put people and events into perspective. Van Allen does this very well indeed. She shows how Riley's early work with traveling medicine shows honed his acting abilities for later poetry recitals. She discusses other writers of the time whom Riley admired, such as Bret Harte, Longfellow and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. When such topics as alcoholism or the lecture circuit are central to Riley's life, she shares current scholarship on the subject. As Riley's public persona changed over the years from scruffy bohemian to dapper aristocrat Van Allen supplies good illustrations to document this transformation; and the juxtaposition of portraits by T. C. Steele, John Singer Sargent and Kin Hubbard is inspired. Van Allen also traces the lineage of Riley's favorite publisher, the Indianapolis firm that ultimately became Bobbs-Merrill Company. By illuminating the context for his life with such skill, the author gives us better insights to his significance and legacy.

There is so much that is meritorious about this book, it seems almost petty to call attention to a few areas of weakness. Reviewers, however, are obliged to offer suggestions for improvement. The prose is generally clear and understandable, but on occasion academic jargon in-

trudes. For example, "artisanal" relationships, "commodified" identities, and Jeffersonian "polity" are a bit rarified for a general audience. Citations, likewise, are clear and understandable. On occasion, Van Allen includes needless material in her footnotes, and on other occasions places information there that would be helpful in the narrative. For example, background biography on Mark Twain is redundant in Chapter Five; the material on Bell's palsy, on the other hand, clarifies Riley's medical condition in 1887, and should be in the text rather than in the footnote. Factual errors are few and minor. Henry Clay was the Whig presidential candidate in 1844, not John Tyler; the building that Riley visited in Boston was the Old North Church, not the Old South. Footnotes and the bibliography indicate that Van Allen consulted the logical manuscripts, books and newspapers. One collection not listed is the Federal Writers Project at Indiana State University. It contains correspondence and reminiscences related to Riley compiled in the 1930s but never published.

These minor reservations excepted, the book is solid, coherent and convincing. Its arguments are logical and well documented. Van Allen integrates new and old material gracefully. The book is physically attractive although the footnotes are located in the back rather than at the bottom of the pages. Illustrations are numerous, helpful, and well reproduced. Because of its subject and its quality, this work should enjoy a long shelf life.

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