
Book Reviews

James Whitcomb Riley: A Life. By Elizabeth J. Van Allen. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. Pp. xii, 352. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.)

James Whitcomb Riley would probably have been mortified by Elizabeth Van Allen's biography. After all, as she demonstrates, he devoted at least as much effort to creating and maintaining an image for himself as he did to his literary endeavors. One hopes, however, that deep down he would have been grateful for this thorough, balanced treatment of his life, which allows him finally to lay down the burden of virtual sainthood and treats his foibles and faults with sympathy.

Van Allen's detailed and well-documented narrative covers the poet's life in chapters from "A *Child-World*" to "Preparing a Legacy" and includes a generous number of revealing quotations from Riley's correspondence. She also places his life in the larger context of his times, showing how his idealization of a simpler time helped his readers escape from the changes occurring in American society. She concludes that it was this pandering to the nostalgic impulse that undermined Riley's critical reputation.

Van Allen's zeal to convey the impact Riley had on his contemporaries occasionally leads her into misinterpretations: for example, her claim that Riley's popularity was responsible in part for there being an Indiana Day at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 (p. 251) ignores the fact that every state had its "day" during that fair. In addition, there are occasional lapses into jargon ("validating" his audience, p. 121) or awkward phrasing ("to order grief and to abstract and objectify the dead," p. 253). Finally, one could wish for more consistent editing: overediting of quotes with brackets and *sics* alternates with instances of typographical errors, dropped words, and incorrectly cited titles.

More substantively, Van Allen could have explored Riley's personal relationships in greater depth: she states tantalizingly that Riley "played an instrumental role in helping start [Booth] Tarkington's literary career" (p. 243); more information would have provided a nice counterpoint to Riley's inclination toward self-centeredness. This reader would like to have learned more about the intriguing friendship between Riley and Eugene V. Debs, which on the surface appears so improbable. In her otherwise cogent "Epilogue," Van Allen ignores the issue of Riley's string of failed relationships with women. Finally, she does not analyze the contrast between his ability to eulogize an abstract, mythical past so convincingly and his inability to produce more than tediously conventional elegiac poems for family and close friends (p. 253).

These quibbles aside, Van Allen has produced a fine work that will be the benchmark for any further study of Riley's life.

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