

# Ethelwyn Wetherald: An early, popular, and prolific poet

R.G. Moyles

**Résumé:** *Entre 1890 et 1919, Ethelwyn Wetherald a publié soixante-dix poèmes pour enfants dans le magazine américain Youth's Companion. Elle n'était pas la seule Canadienne à collaborer à ce magazine, mais sa contribution fait d'elle une authentique poète – Gordon Moyles situe pour nous son oeuvre et nous fait redécouvrir certains de ces textes publiés aux Etats-Unis.*

In the thirteenth issue of *Canadian Children's Literature* (1979) Lorraine McMullen deftly described E.W. Thomson's considerable contribution to *Youth's companion*, one of the most popular and perhaps best children's magazines ever published in the United States. She also noted that, throughout its long career (1827-1928), many other Canadian writers of juvenile fiction and poetry found ready acceptance in its pages. Arthur Wentworth Eaton was the first of these, but was followed by such notable names as J. Macdonald Oxley, Charles G.D. Roberts, Robert Barr, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, Bliss Carman, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Margaret Marshall Saunders, L.M. Montgomery, Francis Lillie Pollock, Norman Duncan and Marjorie Pickthall. Among them, they contributed more than five hundred poems, short stories and sketches to *Youth's companion*.

By far the most prolific of the Canadians, however, was Ethelwyn Wetherald (1857-1940) of Rockwood, Ontario, who had approximately seventy poems accepted by the magazine's editors between July 3, 1890, and April 24, 1919. Wetherald, the daughter of a prominent Quaker educator (founder of Rockwood Academy), had gained considerable popularity as a writer, contributing regularly to the *Toronto Globe*, and in 1895-96 serving as assistant to Francis Bellamy, editor of *The ladies' home journal*. She was, as her own reminiscences testify, a well-read and well-travelled lady, and an energetic writer. Her poems, though now little known, were so well esteemed that Earl Grey was known to have ordered twenty-five copies of one of her books and Sir Wilfrid Laurier quoted them in his House of Commons speeches.

Most of Wetherald's poems in *Youth's companion* are, like those of Roberts and Carman and Scott, just poems – neither "juvenile" nor "adult" – some good and some bad. For the one thing *Youth's companion* did not often do was condescend to its young readers; the editors, among whom was E.W. Thomson,

# GRACIE'S VALENTINE

LITTLE GRACIE wrote a letter, it was only  
just a line,  
And 'twas printed very neatly, "Will you  
be my valentine?"  
With a heart and a dart,  
And a Cupid, pink and smart,  
And a shower of doves and roses, some  
together, some apart.  
(They were only colored pictures cut from plates,  
you understand,  
Spread with mucilage and pounded with a moist  
and chubby hand.)

Little Gracie on her letter printed plainly as  
before,  
"To the very sweetest Dolly in my Uncle  
Joseph's store."  
With an "Oh!" Uncle Joe,

Laughing loud and smiling low,  
Pinned the note upon the sweetest dolly  
in a lovely row;  
Pinned another note that said, "Yes, dear, I'll  
be your valentine."  
Then he wrapped it up in paper and he tied  
it up with twine.

Little Gracie was at supper when the bell  
went ting-a-ling,  
And she said, "Why, that's the postman!  
Oh, I wonder what he'll bring."



Through the hall pattered small,  
Egger feet, and then a call:  
"Papa, mamma, Flora, here's the biggest  
valentine of all!  
It's that lovely, lovely dolly in a soot  
dress—oh, oh!  
Isn't she as sweet, as sweet as—most  
as sweet as Uncle Joe?"

Ethelwyn Wetherald.



seemed to feel that, on the whole, good poetry (both classical and contemporary) knew no age limit but could be read with equal pleasure and understanding by children and adults alike. Thus, most of the poems offered to young people by Lampman and Roberts and Wetherald are exactly those they would later offer to adults – poems with such titles as "Winter song," "An Easter lily," "The patient earth" and "Michaelmas daisies," pleasant reflections on God and Nature.

In Wetherald's case, however, there is one major difference. There was a page in every issue of *Youth's companion* – a "Children's page" – devoted to the very young, a class of children, perhaps from ages four to ten, often ignored in early children's periodicals. In it the editors tried, and very successfully it seems to me, to provide literature – short poems, nature sketches, puzzles, and brief stories – which, by the 1880's at least, was relatively free of overt didacticism and catered to the natural spontaneity and joy of childhood. It was in those pages that the now well-known American children's poets Laura Richards and Carolyn Wells gained prominence. And it was here as well that Ethelwyn Wetherald's best poems are to be found. They are so distinctively "children's poems," so free of the usual romantic jargon, so uninhibited and childlike, so witty and clever, and so skillfully crafted that they deserve to be revived and re-read; for they are, of their kind, just as good as those of the two well-known American poets.

In the poems that follow we see something of the real art of writing poetry for children. While, arguably, there still are traces of adult sensibility, of not being able to meet the child at eye-level, there is a refreshing simplicity, a deft control of colloquial diction, and confident innovativeness ("Spring time, sing time, happy bird-on-wing time"), and a sureness of rhythm that sets them apart from the usual sentimental stuff of the nursery. And when we remember that these poems were written at the turn of the century, when the cautionary tale was still preferred, we are amazed at Wetherald's freedom from the usual didactic pressures.

Ethelwyn Wetherald is not, of course, unknown to Canadian literary historians. Her several books of poems, published between 1903 and 1931, gave contemporary commentators reason to call her a "leading Canadian poet." But that honour soon faded, her poetry was relegated to the "minor" category, and she herself is largely unknown to modern readers. Even her fine little book of children's poems, *Tree-top morning* (1921), which brought together most of those published in *Youth's companion*, has gone unnoticed. If, however, this quiet Quaker lady had been an American, or had taken up American residence, she would, I think, now be represented in one or more of the major anthologies of Children's Literature. Some of her best poems would, I'm sure, find a place alongside Laura Richards' "The umbrella brigade" or Eleanor Farjeon's "The sounds in the morning." It is certainly what they would deserve.

To support that contention, to demonstrate Wetherald's breadth of appeal,

## A DEVOTED MOTHER

By Ethelwyn Wetherald.

If I had a little sick dolly,  
I know what I should do;  
I would tend it with care, and give it fresh air,  
And go to the doctor's, too.  
And then if the doctor should hand me  
Some candy pills from the shelf,  
And dolly said, "Oh, I can't take them—no!"  
I'd swallow them all myself.  
For you know, of course, I could never use force,  
So I'd swallow them all myself.

Yes, I am a careful young mother.  
When dollies are sick and weak  
I forbid them to walk, I don't let them talk,  
Nor even permit them to speak.  
In winter I give them a straw ride,  
Well wrapped up is each little elf,  
And smiling to see with what vigor and glee  
I am skipping and singing myself.  
The unselfish and good and wise mother should  
Do the skipping and singing herself.



DRAWN BY  
W. A. MCCULLOCH

"IN WINTER I GIVE THEM A STRAW RIDE."

and to perhaps restore some of her lost prestige, I offer below a selection of her children's poems from *Youth's companion*. The mini-anthology includes five reproductions from *Youth's companion*, to show how accompanying illustrations, typeface and design, as well as page placement, could enhance the overall effects of the poet's words. Such generous treatment, it should be added, clearly indicates that Wetherald, like Laura Richards and a very few others, was highly regarded by the editors of *Youth's companion* and certainly looked forward to by its readers.

#### THE WISE FROGS

Early in the spring, with the wind on my cheek,  
I went to the pond an old friend to seek.

"Old Friend Frog, what's the weather like?

Speak!"

Then a voice responded very low and weak:

"Still rather bleak, still rather bleak;

Bu-bu-bu-bl-eak, bu-bu-bu-bl-eak."

Later in the spring, with only just a few

Of my frog acquaintances, I said, "How do you  
do?"

Pleasant weather this, and a very pleasant view,  
And isn't that a lovely-looking sky?" "Quite  
true.

Very pretty blue, very pretty blue;

Bu-bu-bu-bl-ue, bu-bu-bu-bl-ue."

Warm grew the nights, and loud as a loom

Floated all the water voices up to my room.

"Tell me of the earth," I whispered through the  
gloom.

"Is it full of flowers?" They answered with a  
boom,

"Full, full of bloom, full, full of bloom,

Bu-bu-bu-bl-oom, bu-bu-bu-bl-oom."

#### WHEN TEDDY WENT TO THE WOODS

He nearly caught a chipmunk,

He nearly stunned an owl,

He nearly saw a polar bear

He nearly heard it growl.

He nearly killed a rattlesnake,

He nearly felt it squirm,

He nearly hooked the biggest fish  
 With nearly half a worm.  
 He nearly walked a dozen miles,  
 He very nearly hit  
 An eagle sitting in its nest,  
 He nearly climbed to it.  
 Now if he nearly did so much  
 When young, it seems to me,  
 What a wonderfully clever man  
 He'll nearly grow to be.

### SOMEBODY'S BIRTHDAY

This is somebody's birthday,  
 Just as sure as fate;  
 Some little girl is five today,  
 Some little boy is eight;  
 Some little child is three today,  
 Some older one thirteen;  
 Some little twins are precisely two—  
 Two apiece I mean.

Someone is eating birthday cake,  
 And picking out the plums;  
 Someone is counting her birthday dolls  
 On all her fingers and thumbs;  
 Someone is bouncing his birthday ball,  
 Or winding her birthday watch;  
 Someone is not too wise or tall  
 For birthday butter scotch.

Think of the scores of birthday gifts,  
 Think of the birthday cheer,  
 Think of the birthday happiness,  
 Every day of the year, my dear,  
 Every day we're alive,  
 Some happy child is one or two  
 Or three or four or five.

### DOLLS' SLUMBER SONG

Hushaby, my babies, now the day is closing,  
 All the tired little birds are drowsing in the nest;  
 Out upon the lake the lilies are reposing,  
 And so must you, my little ones, upon your mam-  
 ma's breast.



APPLE-BLOSSOM TIME.

Spring time, sing time, happy bird-on-wing time.  
 Tripping down the orchard path while the blossoms ring time!  
 May dew be peartier, May branches brierier,  
 And the little school-bound feet early start and earlier,  
 So as to have a long time and a sunny song time  
 Ere we reach the schoolhouse door, ring "clock and gong time.  
 Longer will the morn'g be and full of jubilation,  
 When the harvest apples drop in the glad vacation.

May time, play time, don't we have a gay time  
 Underneath the orchard boughs at the close of daytime!  
 Busy lips chattering, pink blooms scattering,  
 On the lifted face and hands now we feel them spattering;  
 Then with hearts as feather light, tripping off together, quite  
 Like a pair of birds, so happy are we in the weather bright.  
 Fairer will the days be and full of jubilation,  
 When the peaches color up in the near vacation.

*Elizabeth Wetherald.*

S-l-e-e-p, sleep, sink, sink to sleep-  
Claribel and Muriel, Polly and Bo-peep.

Hushaby, my dearies, now the dew is falling,  
Over on the meadow evening shadows creep.  
On the edge of Slumberland hear your mamma  
calling,

"Come my little family, it's time to go to sleep."  
S-l-e-e-p, sleep, sink to sleep-  
Claribel and Muriel, Polly and Bo-peep."

#### THE FIVE PAIR OF TWINS

Polly, Polly, Polly, tell the five pair of twins,-  
The tiny scraps of small ones,  
The thin and toppling tall ones,  
The cunningly-devised ones,  
The four just middling-sized ones,-  
We're going to have a candy pull-  
Tonight the fun begins-  
So Polly, Polly, Polly tell the five pair of twins.

Polly, Polly, Polly, tell the five pair of twins  
They may make some candy dollies,  
Like the china one of Mollie's,  
And some yellow candy kittens,  
And a pair of candy mittens,  
And a lot of candy fishes  
With the sweetest set of fins,  
So Polly, Polly, Polly, tell the five pair of twins.

But Polly, Polly, Polly, if the five pair of twins  
Go swimming in molasses,  
Or to smearing Grandma's glasses,  
Or to setting fire to paper,  
Or-well any other caper,  
They'll all be tied together  
Till they're sorry for their sins.  
So Polly, Polly, Polly, warn the five pair of twins.

And Polly, Polly, Polly, when the five pair of  
twins  
And the children of our neighbors  
Have finished with their labors,  
While without the sleet is pelting,  
And within the candy's melting,

You must scrub those sticky infants  
Till they're neat as jeweled pins.  
Did you know your thumbs and fingers were the  
five pair of twins?

#### FOUR CLASSES OF CHILDREN

The children born in winter-time  
Are bright as the stars in a frosty clime.  
Bright as the ice on a moon-lit lea,  
Bright as the gleam of a Christmas tree.  
And what you will notice about them all,  
Wherever you have found them,  
Is that they're not only bright themselves—  
They brighten the lives around them.

The children born in the time of spring  
Mirth and happiness with them bring.  
Cheery as crickets, blithe as a rill,  
Light as the breeze that is never still.  
Gay as the robin's earliest song,  
Though chilly winds may flout them.  
And then, they're not only glad themselves—  
They gladden the lives about them.

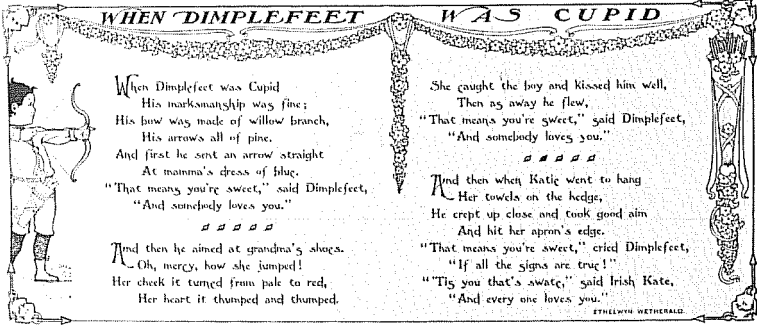
The summer children are good and sweet,  
Sweet as berries and good as wheat,  
Sweet as the breath of a clover place,  
Sweet as a breeze to a sun-burned face.  
With voices sweet as the sound of streams,  
How pleasant it is to hear them!  
And then they're not only sweet themselves—  
They sweeten the lives that are near them.

The autumn children are clever indeed.  
They love to study, to think and read.  
They walk in the empty woodland vast,  
And think of the future and think of the past.  
I've noticed it over and over again,  
And mentioned it to their mothers,  
The autumn children are thinkers themselves  
And VERY thoughtful of others.



WHEN DIMPLEFEET

WAS CUPID

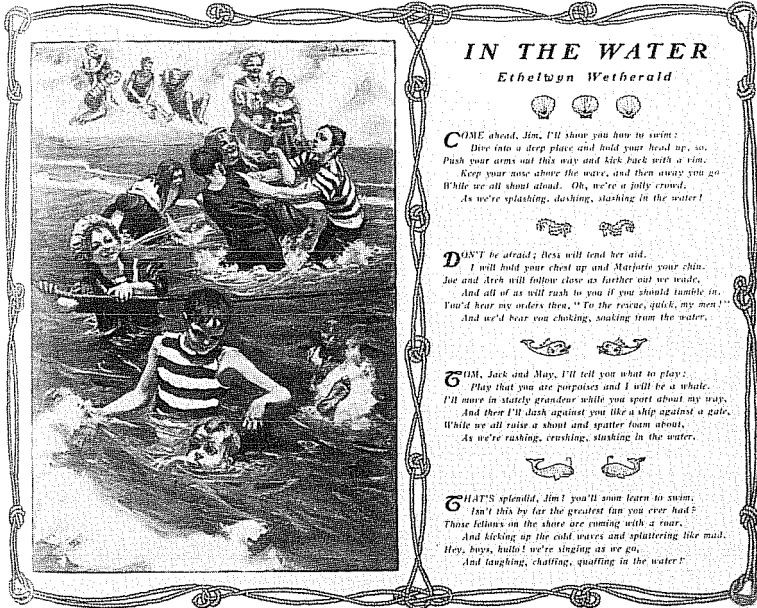


When Dimplefeet was Cupid  
His marksmanship was fine;  
His bow was made of willow branch,  
His arrows all of pine.  
And first he sent an arrow straight  
At mamma's dress of blue,  
"That means you're sweet," said Dimplefeet,  
"And somebody loves you."  
♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

And then he aimed at grandma's shooza.  
Oh, mercy, how she jumped!  
Her cheek it turned from pale to red,  
Her heart it thumped and thumped.

She caught the boy and kissed him well,  
Then as away he flew,  
"That means you're sweet," said Dimplefeet,  
"And somebody loves you."  
♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

And then when Katie went to bang  
Her towels on the hedge,  
He crept up close and took good aim  
And hit her apron's edge.  
"That means you're sweet," cried Dimplefeet,  
"If all the signs are true!"  
"Tis you that's swate," said Irish Kate,  
"And every one loves you."  
ETHELWYN WETHERAID



IN THE WATER

Ethelwyn Wetheraid

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦  
**C**OME ahead, Jim, I'll show you how to swim:  
Dive into a deep place and hold your head up, so,  
Push your arms out this way and kick back with a tom.  
Keep your nose above the wave, and then away you go  
While we all shout aloud. Oh, we're a jolly crowd,  
As we're splashing, dashing, slushing in the water!

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦  
**D**ON'T be afraid; Dex will lend her aid.  
I will hold your chest up and Marjorie your chin.  
Joe and Arch will follow close as father out we wade,  
And all of us will rush to you if you should tumble in.  
You'd hear my orders then, "To the rescue, quick, my men!"  
And we'd bear you choking, soaking from the water.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦  
**G**OH, Jack and May, I'll tell you what to play:  
Play that you are porpoises and I will be a whale.  
I'll move in stately grandeur while you sport about my way,  
And then I'll dash against you like a ship against a gate.  
While we all raise a shout and spatter foam about,  
As we're rushing, crushing, slushing in the water.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦  
**W**HAT'S splendid, Jim! you'll soon learn to swim.  
Isn't this by far the greatest fun you ever had?  
Those fellows on the shore are coming with a roar,  
And kicking up the cold waves and spluttering like mud.  
Hey, boys, hullo! we're slinging as we go,  
And laughing, chaffing, quaffing in the water!

## TWO JULY BOYS

Said little John of Ottawa to Tom of Washington,  
"Of all the months I think July's the very nicest one."  
Said little Tom of Washington to John of Ottawa,  
"Oh, yes, for then I have the nicest time you ever saw!"

"My pa hands out a dollar!" "And so does mine!" "I buy  
A bushel of firecrackers." "You do? Why, so do I!"  
"They always let me sit up late so see the rockets flare."  
"And wherever there are cannon or torpedoes I am there."

Said John of Ottawa, "The First is always packed with fun."  
"The First? You mean the Fourth!" said little Tom of  
Washington.  
"The Fourth? Why, no, I mean the First," said John of  
Ottawa.  
"Well, you're the funniest boy," said both, "I think I ever saw!"

## WHEN FATHER IS IT

When it rains all day or the weather is rough,  
And dull in the house we sit,  
There is fun to be had playing blind man's buff  
When father is "It."  
We tie a big handkerchief over his eyes.  
He moves very quick for a man of his size,  
And knows where we are by our laughter and  
cries,  
When father is "It."

The little girls creep up and tickle his ear,  
When father is "It."  
He doesn't quite catch them, but comes pretty  
near,  
When father is "It."

They pull at his coat tails, he gives a great start,  
Then spins around twice and is off like a dart.  
We dive 'neath his fingers with loud-beating  
heart,  
When father is "It."

He whoops and he prances, he capers and bounds,  
When father is "It."  
We're a set of wild heathen, to judge by the  
sounds,

When father is "It."  
Tom laughs till he has to lie down on the floor,  
And Archie and Joe—you should just hear  
them roar,  
For we feel that we simply can't stand any more  
When father is "It.":

#### TREE-TOP MORNINGS

How I like the tree-top mornings in the early  
early spring!  
There's a steady sound of roaring,  
Like a score of rivers pouring,  
Or a hundred giants snoring,  
Or a thousand birds up-soaring.  
There's a rattle as of battle and a sort of splen-  
did swing  
Of the branches and the curtains and almost of  
everything.  
Oh, I love the tree-top mornings in the early  
early spring!

Oh, what fun on tree-top mornings in the early  
early spring,  
When the wind is loud as thunder,  
And it snaps the boughs asunder,  
And it lifts you up from under,  
Just to run zig-zag and wonder  
At the hurry and the scurry that such windy  
mornings bring,  
At the flapping and the slapping of the clothes-  
line on the wing!  
Oh, I love the tree-top mornings in the early,  
early spring!

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