The Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America

Edited by
DONALD HALL

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For Wesley who spoke pieces
and for Lucy who read aloud

Introduction

The editor of an Oxford Book of Verse serves a purpose documentary and historical as well as aesthetic. Usually, he must collect not only verse that pleases him, but work that represents a place, a time, or a genre. The editor of this book wishes to gather the best verse read over the centuries by American children—except for work of English origin—but he also wishes to represent such verse as they in fact read, whether he admires it or not. If he omitted images of Calvinist hellfire on the grounds that they make inappropriate or improper reading for children, he would misrepresent the history of children's verse in America. It would be equally unhistorical to allow late twentieth-century taste to exclude early nineteenth-century patriotism, sentiment, and morbidity. Doubtless our contemporary fashions in children's verse, which favor humor and nonsense, will one day seem as quaint as pieties about dead children. In this book the editor serves his own taste up to a point; when he could follow his own taste without misrepresenting the history of bookish childhood, he has done so with gratitude; when his own preferences would misrepresent history by omitting representative verses, he has overlooked his own taste.

The terms of the title need narrowing. Culture not geography is the point. Neither Abenaki cradle songs, French Canadian lullabies, nor Mexican schoolyard rhymes find themselves in this collection—and therefore "in America" may be glossed "in English in the United States," although the collection starts with verses current on this continent a century before the United States existed.

As for "children's verse," the term could include traditional material like Mother Goose or the street traditions of jumprope rhymes, as well as verses clearly intended by their authors for the entertainment and edification of the young. It can also include poems, not written for children, which children have enjoyed. Iona and Peter Opie, in *The Oxford Book of Children's Verse,* restrict themselves to an idea of intention. (Elsewhere they have collected traditional rhymes and nursery songs.) The Opies' scholarship and meticulous

intelligence put us all in their debt; but this editor differs on the perennially vexed issue of intentions. Any child, looking at the huge concrete pipe sections manufactured for culverts, knows that these pipes *intend* to be crawled through—whatever the manufacturer or highway engineer had in mind. Much American children's verse was not, in the Opies' words, "written for children, or written with children prominently in mind"—if we consult the author's expressed intentions. But some literature becomes "for children" by what I must call a structural intention. In a letter, Mark Twain denied with some indignation that he wrote *Tom Sawyer* for boys; but boys have known enough to crawl through it.

When children have read a poem from the moment of its publication, I will consider it children's verse, even if the author might protest. Longfellow wrote *Hiawatha, The Courtship of Miles Standish,* "Paul Revere's Ride," and "The Wreck of the Hesperus" for adult readers, as a new Virgil assembling myths for the new United States, and not to amuse children. If he wrote the ditty about the girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead, he chose not to acknowledge it. But Longfellow's poems appeared in children's magazines, in school readers, and in children's annuals. The narratives especially became favorite pieces for memorization and recitation by children and adults. We may assume that editors reprinted these poems in books addressed to children, not only because the editors admired them, but because the poems boiled with adventure, melodrama, strong rhythms, and pounding rhymes. Many of Longfellow's poems look and feel as if they were written for children.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conversely, verses that were intended for children, and not for adult overhearing, appear to twentieth-century eyes wholly impossible for children. Twentieth-century eyes must apply historical correction to their vision in order to read an ABC addressed to children: "In Adam's fall / We sinned all." Children in America took their learning, in school and out, by memorizing verses from *The New England Primer,* and from religious texts like Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* and *The Bay Psalm Book.* Over the centuries, children's verse in America has covered a continent's worth of mood and subject.

Much verse read by early American children, however, is omitted from this collection because it is clearly English in its provenance. Colonial children, like children back home, read Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs, Attempted in Easy Language, for the Use of Children* (1715). They also read secular verse—alphabets, street cries, Mother Goose rhymes, and narratives—imported or pirated from England. By including mostly religious poetry before 1820, this book distorts the record, because it concentrates on work of an American provenance. When Clement Moore published "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in 1822, *American* children's verse as we know it began. We omit English work to avoid reprinting material already available in the Opies' *Oxford Book of Children's Verse*, or, in the matter of Mother Goose, *The Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes*. It would be superfluous to reprint Isaac Watts in this volume, although the American children who read him, until 1776, were subjects of the same sovereign. Because *The New England Primer* dominated American schools I have reprinted samples from it although they doubtless originated in England.

In the eighteenth century in America as in England a few publishers produced many alphabet books and other verse collections for children. John Newbery was the major English source, and Isaiah Thomas of Worcester, Massachusetts, has been called the American Newbery. But Isaiah Thomas made himself the American Newbery all too literally, and reprinted Newbery without acknowledgment, sometimes making minor alterations in the text; prosodically speaking, "Boston" was a useful substitute for "London." Of course until international copyright took force late in the nineteenth century, American publishers typically pirated. (According to one history, in the middle of the nineteenth century almost half of American publications were pirated from England.) It is easy to mistake oneself: For instance, there is the famous early poem about baseball, reprinted in American collections of sports literature, variously attributed and dated:

Base-Ball

The ball once struck off,
Away flies the boy

To the next destined post
And then home with joy.

This poem is English. John Newbery printed it in 1774, and it was quickly pirated in the United States—to the confusion of American historians of sporting literature. (The English game of baseball, doubtless related to "rounders," an ancestor to the American game, is listed by Jane Austen among other children's games in *Northanger Abbey*.)

But the question of provenance, vexing for bibliographers, is no insoluble problem for the editor of this book. When we print alphabets from *The New England Primer*, we claim no separateness from England; we omit Isaac Watts not because of nationality but because of repetition. From the time of Clement Clarke Moore, when school readers like McGuffey would shortly replace the *Primer*, when Sunday School magazines begin to flourish together with children's gift books crowded with uplifting poetry, there is no lack of children's verse in America, written by American authors mostly for an audience of American children.

Although Michael Wigglesworth did not write *The Day of Doom* (1662) for children, his verses on the Last Judgment were directed to children by ministers and pedagogues in the seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth. It was first directed to children because its terror was edifying. Although the official culture of Calvinism was not the only culture—the cat and his fiddle crossed the Atlantic, in the memories of mothers and nursemaids—the official culture accounted for most of the verse that originated in the colonies. Original sin condemned unbaptized dead babies:

You sinners are, and such a share
as sinners may expect,
Such you shall have; for I do save
none but my own elect.
Yet to compare your sin with theirs,
who lived a longer time,
I do confess yours is much less,
though every sin's a crime.

A crime it is, therefore in bliss
you may not hope to dwell;
But unto you I shall allow
the easiest room in Hell.

Puritan writing for children always emphasized the deaths of children, sometimes the horrid death and damnation of the unprepared, and sometimes the glorious expiration of holy infants. James Janeways's *A Token for Children* (prose; English; printed in the colonies as early as 1700) described itself as "an Exact Account of the Conversion, Wholly and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children." *The Bay Psalm Book,* considerably less awful, made lighter reading.

Schooling was largely *The New England Primer,* which was the most widely read book in the colonies aside from the Bible. For more than a century, the *Primer* formed the child's introduction to language—to spelling, vocabulary, and to literature—largely by way of piety. Although A and Z never varied, different publishers altered some of the other rhymes. In early versions, not all the letters are illustrated by religious allusions; the Great Awakening corrected these lapses, and "The cat doth play / And after slay" turned into "Christ crucified / For sinners died." Over the decades of its eminence, *The New England Primer* altered to reflect history and society; the American Revolution was another great awakening, and we can observe piety dwindle into patriotism. "Whales in the sea / God's voice obey" becomes by 1802 "By Washington / Great deeds were done."

The New England Primer, with its quaint alphabet, acquired considerable charm, perhaps especially after it went out of fashion. In 1942, when Robert Frost published *A Witness Tree,* he used an epigraph to locate his title's allusion:

Zaccheus he
Did climb a tree
His Lord to see.

This minor New Testament figure provided the terminal letter in all editions. In an early tale called "The Seven Vagabonds," Na-

thaniel Hawthorne's narrator looks through the wares of an itinerant bookseller: "I was glad to find that dear little venerable volume, the New England Primer, looking as antique as ever, though in its thousandth new edition. . . ." The Houghton Library at Harvard owns Hawthorne's Primer, another from the family of Emily Dickinson, another with a pencil inscription on the inside front cover: "H Melville/March 6, 1851./Pittsfield, Mas."

A little book indeed—it was typically about three inches by four—the *Primer* was doubtless regarded with less affection in its heyday, but it was indeed almost the universal text for the children of New England and the East. By most estimates, something like six million copies existed; they wore out, and people saw no point in keeping them; fewer than two thousand survive. First printed in 1689 or so, the *Primer* continued in use into the first third of the nineteenth century. (For more about the *Primer*'s origins, see page 289.) It was usually about eighty-eight pages long, and after the alphabet appeared "Now I lay me down to sleep," children's hymns, and poems by Dr. Isaac Watts (after 1715) including the Cradle Hymn. Usually the *Primer* featured another poem of English Puritan provenance, "John Rogers' Exhortation to His Children," in which the martyred Protestant, about to be burned at the stake, addresses sage moral advice in bouncy fourteeners ("Be never proud by any means, build not your house too high, / But always have before your eyes that you were born to die.") Often a woodcut illustration represented John Rogers burning at the stake, surrounded by "His Wife with nine small Children, and one at her breast."

Children learned spelling and pronunciation by memorizing lists of words separated into syllables, by studying further prayers, the Apostles' Creed, and a shorter catechism. Further poems often included a "Dialogue between Christ, Youth, and the Devil," and accounts of the exemplary deaths of children: "From death's arrest no age is free, / Young children too may die. / My God, may such an awful sight / Awakening be to me! / O! that by early grace I might / For death prepared be."

Such was the official culture of Calvinism, the overt and continuous message poured into childish ears. Of course it was not the only

message that reached these ears. Not all families were Puritan, even in New England; in the Southern colonies, *The New England Primer* was not so prevalent (sometimes it circulated under a less regional title) and English books were common. For that matter, child rhymes from the old country persisted in the new, and mothers continued to speak nursery rhymes over cradles. In *The New England Primer*'s woodcuts we find confirmation: In early editions, when C was still "The cat doth play / And after slay," the accompanying illustration showed a cat playing a fiddle; the Mother Goose rhyme about the cat and the fiddle was not printed in North America until a hundred years after the *Primer's* first publication. Secular alphabets appeared, like the "A was an Archer" that the Opies collect; Isaiah Thomas reprinted John Newbery's good-humored rhymes of *A Little Pretty Pocket Book,* which was intended as the title page informs us not only for "Instruction" but for "amusement of little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly." Thomas of Worcester also pirated *Little Goody Two Shoes,* whose authorship has sometimes been ascribed to Newbery's friend Oliver Goldsmith, in addition to *Mother Goose's Melodies, Nurse Truelove's Christmas Box,* and *Tom Thumb's Folio.* By the late eighteenth century, North American children suffered no lack of secular rhymes.

And at school, where memorization and recitation remained the chief pedagogy, rhymes were not restricted to piety, morals, and alphabeticism. By rhymes one learned geography and mathematics. Although it was verse that American children read, the reader will discover none of it in this collection, bar Introductory examples:

> A letter is an uncompounded sound
> Of which there no division can be found,
> These sounds to certain characters we fix,
> Which in the English tongue are twenty-six.

Marmaduke Multiply's Merry Method of Making Minor Mathematicians teaches multiplication tables by catchy rhymes: "Twice 4 are 8. / Your bonnet is not straight." "Nine times 10 are 90. / Now you shall taste my fine tea." More sophisticated mathematical problems, which resemble the rhyming riddles always popular with children, also turn up in verse:

When first the Marriage Knot was tied
Between my wife and me
My age did hers as far exceed
As three times three does three.
But when ten years and half ten years
We man and wife had been
Her age came up as near to mine
As eight is to sixteen.
Now tell me I pray
What were our ages on our wedding day?

There is also *Geography Epitomized* (Philadelphia, 1784) with its rhymed cosmos:

This globe that's the grave and the birthplace of man
Exhibits vast tracts both of water and land.
The water, attracted, incessantly rolls,
And seems to extend to the far distant poles:
The oceans, or three immense parts of the same,
Th'Atlantic, Pacific and Indian name.
O'er more than one half of earth's surface they glide
And the land into three distinct portions divide.

When we note the date and place of this volume, we may remain unsurprised by the note of patriotism, or nationalism, struck by its author Robert Davidson (1750–1812):

The states independent, united, and free,
In order, as follows, arranged we may see.
Massachusetts to south of New Hampshire we view,
Rhode Island, more south, and Connecticut too.
—The states for themselves the New Englanders won,
Who fled to these climes persecution to shun.
New York next appears, as to westward we go,
Where Hudson's famed waters far southerly flow.
To the sons of New Jersey let praises be given
Who saw the proud foe from the Delaware driven.
To the wise Pennsylvanians praise too we'll give

Who west of the far-flowing Delaware live.
—This state runs far westward Ohio to view,
And counties thirteen can now claim as her due.
Her lands were by purchase obtained from rude men;
And her name still imports that her founder was Penn.
The Delaware state lies to south of the same
And takes from the river to eastward its name,
The land that from Mary is called, as they say,
Extends on both sides of the Chesapeak Bay.
On the south of Potomac Virginia lies,
And boasts of her Washington, valiant and wise.
The two Carolinas more south still are seen,
And Georgia's last of the happy thirteen.

Great change came over the citizens of North America in a period of fifty years that spanned two centuries and included the Revolution and the War of 1812. Between 1770 and 1820, as the *Primer*'s W altered from Whale to Washington, American pirates of English books took great pains to Americanize: In a 1787 reprint of *Little Goody Two Shoes*, a footnote called patriotic attention to English injustice: "Such is the state of things in Britain,—Americans prize your liberty."

But nationalism not only revised books; it also originated them: Noah Webster's speller, and later his dictionary, arose from Webster's desire to substitute American practices for English, a desire which he shared with his audience. It was in this atmosphere that Parson Weems invented stories about young Presidents-to-be, and Samuel Goodrich became the first eminent author of juvenile literature for the new nation, under the name of Peter Parley, with stories that entertained while they instructed. Nationalism provided a noble motive, the desire to promulgate a native American culture; the same desire led Longfellow to fabricate epics of American origins—and Whitman, later, to write *Leaves of Grass*.

Juvenile and American literature bloomed and flourished together, out of the same ebullient and defiant celebration of independence and difference. American literature begins half a century after the Revolution, with Poe's first volume of verse, *Tamerlane*, in 1827. If we look askance at Poe, we can claim that our literature begins

only a little later, with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850. When Nathaniel Hawthorne (who despised Peter Parley and called him "a dealer in slipslop") wrote *A Wonder Book* (1852) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853), he became the first great author in the language to write what we may call a children's book.

As piety receded, patriotism took its place . . . but piety did not recede without a struggle, and patriotism did not lack for piety. From the 1820s for a century children's periodicals thrived and proliferated, beginning with Sunday School texts and Christmas annuals, moving on to long-enduring magazines, especially *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas*. The market required stories and poems written for children; writers obliged, especially women, and the quantity of nineteenth-century children's verse—hundreds of thousands of poems—does testimony to the popularity of juvenile literature. Along with the periodicals came the school readers, the McGuffeys especially replacing *The New England Primer* as best-seller, which printed verse and prose from all sources: speeches from Shakespeare's plays, Sir Walter Scott, Wordsworth, Tennyson—but also the American poets, many reprinted from the periodicals: Freneau, Poe, Longfellow, Bryant, Whittier, Holmes, Lowell. Although memorization and recitation had always been prominent in pedagogy, the speaking of pieces now became a major American pastime, not only in schools for learning, but also in church, town hall, and Grange for entertainment. Narrative poetry thrived at the center of this fashion, and recitation became the great forum of publication for poetry from the early nineteenth century well into the twentieth.

The Sunday School movement called for a children's literature that inculcated sound morals and pious reflection; it also called for realism rather than fantasy. Underground juvenile literature, persistent as folksong and dance, perpetuated the old religion of fairy stories and Mother Goose that smacked not only of frivolity but of superstition, idolatry, and irrationalism. Although the American Sunday School movement took its lead from English sources (Hannah More, the Taylor sisters), it aimed itself at national as well as moral feeling; it demanded not only an uplifting realism but an American reality. Early Sunday School magazines, and gift books pious or sentimental, printed poems anonymously; one will find