

A NEBRASKA POET.

Mrs. Peattie Reviews Carl Smith's New Book

For the first time in the history of Omaha a book of poems worthy of the name has been issued from an Omaha press by an Omaha writer. The poems are the work of Mr. Carl Smith, whose name is known to everyone in this town. The press is that of Mr. John Gideon—a fine name, worthy of a publisher, and destined, one hopes, for typographical honors.

I am not in the least embarrassed in reviewing Mr. Smith's verses by the fact that we have worked together for the last five years on the same paper. I am not influenced by any such association or friendship to mistake bad work for good work. For I divorce myself from all memory of that association and friendship when I take his book to read it with the eyes of a reviewer.

With a few exceptions they are homely—they do not stand for a class and a section to so great a degree as do James Whitcomb Riley's. But they are of the west and of the "people;" they have the fervor and emphasis of western feeling; they have the paraphernalia of western life. "Where the Sun Goes down" is the beautiful title they bear, and they explain themselves on the title page as being "Some vagrant verses from the west-land." Many of them have appeared previously in *Harper's Weekly*, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, the *World-Herald*, and other periodical papers.

The quality in them which most commends itself to the lover of verse is the sweet and wholesome humanness. There is not a pessimistic nor egotistic line in the whole book. Instead there is a flavor of simple happiness, or friendliness of a gloriously free childhood and a manhood enriched by honest love. One is heartily proud that the verses which emanate from this young community should be so true and hearty, and oblivious to old sophistries, and so free from new affectations. For, indeed, there is no mimicry in them. They are original beyond all things, and they mirror many phases of our western life as perfectly as a camera could have done. They have, however, what the camera never can have, a perception of the soul of things. Like almost all the poetic work done in America, they lack the drama and passion, the depth and storm of great poetry. The American poet is not yet born. But from many different parts come true and comforting strains, and it is with perfect honesty of judgment that I place Carl Smith's poems in a very respectable place among the writings of our living versifiers. It is far and away the most pretentious and admirable book of the sort ever written by a Nebraska writer.

It is the novelist and poet who endear locality to the hearts of the people, and who make it famous and memorable. And the writer who preserves the picture of a new land in his verses must needs to be one who sees with his own eyes—one who creates his literature, and who does not copy it. Mr. Smith's work is not of a descriptive sort, yet "Desert Nevada" may give an idea of his power to condense in a few lines, the physical qualities of a place. Anyone who knows Nevada will recognize the terrible truthfulness of the picture.

Away to east, brown ridges thin and bare
Notch the blue burning sky;
There is no motion in the quivering air,
No wild bird hurries by.

Stretching afar, like some great counterpane,
The withering alkali
Spreads in white reaches o'er the scorching plain,
Where all is parched and dry.

No path to mark the early traveler's way;
No cold, respectful stones
To show where in the blazing sun decay
The grinning skeletons.

And when grim spirits come to that cur'd land
To be where wanderers fell,
They look in terror at the burning sand
And hurry back to hell.

Here is a poem of the sand hills, in the metre familiarized so intimately by Longfellow, and seeming on that account to have a familiar ring, though dealing with a subject with which Longfellow was unacquainted:

The sand hills are drear in the autumn;
No blushing leaved trees tint the waste;
The road from the bridge to the bottom
By the wide-blowing drift is effaced.

The sand drives its way down the valleys
On puffs that are chilling and raw,
Till far in the lowland it rallies
And hurries back up through the draw.

The smoke rises ragged and scanty
And eddies, and circles, and shifts,
Like a spirit above the sod shanty
That cowers low there in the drifts.

There is grey where the cockle burrs wander
From the middle on over the hill;
There is grey for the creek bed down yonder—
All grey, and all lonely—and still.

But the homesteader known no dejection,
For the fire in the sod house is bright.
And he looks away toward the third section
And waits for his next neighbor's light.

And the children look, too, and are happy,
And bright is the worn mother's cheek,
For home is sweet home—yes, and pappy
Is going to "prove up" next week.

Nebraskans know just what all this means—they know the struggle, the solitude, the sacrifice, the fight with hunger and cold, and heat, and endurance and forbearance the pioneer must endure—they know the eagerness of "home" which has made this state, in spite of many drawbacks, what it is. And they are sure to love the poet who has preserved these experiences for them in easily committed rhyme.

There are some verses with the blizzard for a subject that chill the heart, and a charming compliment to the prairies, written on the Pacific coast, where the writer turns his eyes from the palms to dream of "gray cottonwoods uprising" and is oblivious to the glory of green surf in longing "for the sight of sluggish river."

For bright as the sea and the ocean beach
May be when the waves are fretting.
A wandering vagrant that cannot teach
The faithless art of forgetting.

There are love lines mixed up with the description, as for example in "Love's Longitude," where is a little tale of California and Nebraska.

It is noon and the city is throbbing
In the hour of its one breathing space;
There's a respite from grinding and robbing
And a pause in the hurrying space.
They would laugh if they knew in the street there
The time that I hold it to be;
It is twelve in the dust and the heat there,
But up here it's a quarter to three.

The hands of my watch move as slowly
As the hands of the clock on the tower,
But an influence, gentle and holy,

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