Ethelwyn Wetherald’s Poetry, An Appreciation,

By John W. Garvin

It may be regarded as almost a truism that if a poet be placed in any environment, particularly of Nature, things of beauty will soon be observed and sung about. Most of her life Miss Wetherald has lived at what is now the old homestead in Pelham township, Niagara Peninsula, which is environed by every rural charm; and scarcely an object or phase of beauty thereabouts has escaped her observation and poetic expression. And human life as well, as she has seen it lived, or has read of it, or as her wisdom has interpreted it, has been given manifold utterance in rhythmical, musical poems. A complete edition of her lyrics and sonnets, three hundred and fifty in number, has just been issued by Nelson’s. Her ‘Lyrics of the Seasons’ are seventy-nine in number, and exquisite indeed are most of them. She was born in April this may account in part for the warmth of feeling which inspired such lines as these:

When spring unbound comes o’er us like a flood,
My spirit slips its bars
And thrills to see the trees break into bud
As skies break into stars.

How shall we fasten the door of spring
Wide, so wide that it cannot close?
Though buds are filling and frogs are trilling
And violets breaking and grass awakening,
Yet doubtfully back and forth it blows
Till come the birds, and the woodlands ring
With sharp beak stammer—

The sudden clamour
Of the woodpecker’s hammer
At the door of spring.

* * *

A spirit through
My window came when earth was soft with dew,
Close at the tender edge of dawn, when all
The spring was new,
And bore me back
Along her rose-and-starry tinted track,
And showed me how the full-winged day emerged
From out the black.

Birds and their warblings have attracted poets the world over; and English poetry is rich in melodious lyrics, giving expression to their appeal. But no other Canadian poet has attained to the high level of excellence in songs about birds, reached by Miss Wetherald. The Indigo Bird will serve to illustrate:

When I see,
High on the tip-top of a tree,
Something blue by the breezes stirred,
But so far up that the blue is blurred,
So far up no green leaf flies
Twixt its blue and the blue of the skies,
Then I know, ere a note be heard,
That is naught but the Indigo bird.

Blue on the branch and blue in the sky,
And naught between but the breezes high,
And naught so blue by the breezes stirred
As the deep, deep blue of the Indigo bird.
When I hear
A song like a bird laugh, blithe and clear,
As though of some airy jest he had heard
The last and the most delightful word:
A laugh as fresh in the August haze
As it was in the full-voiced April days;
Then I know that my heart is stirred
By the laugh-like song of the Indigo bird.

Joy on the branch and joy in the sky,
And naught between but the breezes high;
And naught so glad on the breezes heard
As the gay, gay note of the Indigo bird.

Miss Wetherald’s love songs are replete
with restrained passion, but as to their
message a number are quite unusual in modern verse. They give emphasis to the danger of too close an intimacy:

Dear, give your soul to me;
Let it in your glances shine;
Let a path of ecstasy
Stretch between your eyes and mine.
Should you press me to your heart,
That enchanted,
That enchanted little pathway must depart.

If you love me, tell me so
In your greeting, in your eyes,
In your footsteps, swift or slow,
In your tender-voiced replies.
Love that stays in heart and blood
Lives forever in the bud;
Once in words ’tis past recall—
Down the lovely petals fall.

The humorous poems for adults are fourteen in number. They are original and deliciously amusing. ‘Self-Righteousness’ is a characteristic example:

Unto the diamond with a flaw
The perfect pebble spake:
‘Alas, poor sister, some great law
Of heaven you did break,
Since Imperfection’s curse I see
Whene’er your form I view;
But cheer up! someday you may be
A perfect pebble, too.

There is no other poet known to me
whose heart is so charged with tender
sympathy for all things that have life.
There is no sentimentality or affectation
in this. It is genuine affection. In Miss Wetherald’s religion and philosophy, the kinship of all finite living things is unquestionable, for they are the creation of the One Loving All-Father.

The Screech Owl
Hearing the strange night-piercing sound
Of woe that strove to sing,
I followed where it hid, and found
A soft small-throated thing,
A feathered handful of gray grief,
Perched by the year’s last leaf.
And heeding not that in the sky
The lamps of peace were lit,
It sent abroad that sobbing cry,
And sad hearts echoed it.
O hush, poor grief, so gray, so wild,
God still is with his child!

From ‘The Song Sparrow’s Nest’:

Then in the summer night,
When I awake with a start,
I think of the nest at the height—
The leafy height of my heart:

I think of the mother love,
Of the patient wings close furled,
Of the sky that broods above,
Of the Love that broods on the world.

There are one hundred and twenty-two ‘Lyrics of Life and Wisdom.’ To be fully appreciated they must be read and re-read. The wisdom of an exalted personality, observing life with serenity but with keenness of vision, and with enduring faith in the supremacy of good over evil, is invariably expressed, and that with rare simplicity and beauty of art. Two short examples:

The Fire-Weed
Where forest fires have swept the land,
The musing traveller sees
These little bright-faced flowers stand
In crowded companies.

So in the heart that grief has charred
New fairness decks the sod,
And every blackened life is starred
With tender gifts from God.