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SPECIAL REPORT

The Struggle for Independents

**Audubon Court closes;
others strive to hang on**

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Ella Wheeler Wilcox: The "Solitude" Poet

by James P. Roberts

Ella Wheeler Wilcox was among the first of Wisconsin's writers to achieve literary fame. Her poems are framed in the popular style of the 1870's and 1880's when "the Fireside Poets" — Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Greenleaf Whittier, William Cullen Bryant, and Oliver Wendell Holmes among others — composed rhyming quatrains that "raised hope and made the blood sing." While many of these poems today seem outdated and even juvenile, in Ella's time they would be recited wherever the public would gather for an important occasion.

As one critic noted in reviewing her book, *Poems of Pleasure*, she "speaks to the rhythm of a young and growing nation."

Ella Wheeler was born on Nov. 5, 1850, in Johnstown, Rock County, Wisconsin. Before Ella was two years old, the Wheeler family, consisting of her parents, Marcus and Sarah, and three older children, moved to Dane County and settled in a farmhouse in the town of Westport. Her mother always believed that Ella would be a writer, even before birth. She wrote a novel, using scrap pieces of paper, at the age of nine. Ella's reading habits were influenced by the magazines the family subscribed to, *Peterson's*, *Godey's* and *Demarest's Magazine*, and the New York papers.



As she is quoted in *The Worlds and I*: "This emotional literature... caused me to live in a world quite apart from that of my commonplace farm environment, where the post office was five miles distant, mail came only two or three times a week."

Ella went to Madison University, already a published writer, but her distaste for schoolwork and desire to use all her time in writing grew so strong that she left after one semester. "Everything was material to me in those days — the wind, the bees, the birds, and every word dropped by my elders in conversation which had a possible

romantic trend." The area around the communities of Windsor, Westport, Token Creek and Waunakee (which used to be called Leicester) were fodder for her early poems.

A bright, vivacious girl, Ella had many suitors, one of which was the poet James Whitcomb Riley. After Madison University, Ella accepted a position as editor of a magazine in Milwaukee, but it folded after just three months. While in Milwaukee, though, Ella became part of a club called "OBJ", which meant "Oh, Be Joyful". She also became involved in the temperance movement and at the age of 22 had her first book of poems published by the National Temperance Society, *Drops of Water*. Another volume, *Shells*, consisting of over one hundred poems, was

published the following year.

Ella's first success came about with the publication of a lengthy narrative poem called "Maurine" in 1876. It was a modest success and that inspired Ella to soon after publish another book of poems, *Poems of Passion*, all of which had appeared previously in magazines. It came as a great shock to Ella that her poems were deemed immoral and obscene! One poem, based on a Theophile Gautier short story, was thought to have been about Ella's own experiences.

The lines from Ella's best known poem, "Solitude" came to her when

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Widowed bride inspires literary masterpiece

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Ella saw a young woman “clothed in deepest black... the bride of a year, the widow of a week, a lovely girl whom I had last seen radiant with happiness.” The first four lines came immediately and when Ella recited them to some friends, one said, “Ella, if the rest of your poem measures up to the beginning, you will have a literary masterpiece!”

*“Laugh and the world laughs with you,
Weep and you weep alone.
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
It has trouble enough of its own.”*

Ella met her husband, Robert Wilcox, in 1883 while she was shopping in a Milwaukee store and, after a year, they were married. To Ella’s surprise, Wilcox, beneath his urbane and steadfast manner, also had a great interest in matters of spirituality and reincarnation, which Ella had studied from an early age. After the marriage, Ella moved from Wisconsin to Meriden, Conn. Her literary output continued to grow, by the publication of *An Ambitious Man* in 1896. Ella had already written 13 books.

Upon the discovery that she was pregnant, Ella’s hopes flew high. Assuming that the baby would be a girl, she and Robert referred to it as “Winifred” and constantly included it as a live

person in their conversation and letters. To her shock and sorrow, the baby was boy who lived just 12 hours.

Ella and Robert lived in New York for about 19 years, but would always spend summers at “The Bungalow” on the Connecticut seashore. She had many visitors at “The Bungalow”, including Edwin Markham and Theodosia Garrison. Zona Gale also visited Ella and Ella recounts her first introduction to Zona, who as a young girl, appeared at the home of Judge Braley in Madison while Ella was visiting there and asked Ella if “she would look at some of her [Zona’s] writings and tell her if she had talent.”

In one of the most interesting chapters in her book *The Worlds and I*, Ella talks about “Lunatics I have Known.” A girl from Nebraska appears one day and lives on her lawn writing letters to Ella; several men pursue her until Ella’s friends

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ELLA WHEELER WILCOX: SELECTED READING

1. DROPS OF WATER: A SELECTION OF TEMPERANCE POEMS AND RECITATIONS, S.T. Hammond & Co. and John Kempster & Co, London. 1872.

2. MAURINE, W.B. Conkey & Co, Chicago. 1888.

3. POEMS OF PASSION, Belford-Clarke Co, Chicago. 1883.

4. PERDITA, AND OTHER STORIES, Ogilvie. 1886.

5. POEMS OF PLEASURE, Albert Whitman & Co, Chicago. 1903.

6. THREE WOMEN, W.B. Conkey & Co, Chicago. 1897.

7. AN AMBITIOUS MAN, E. A. Weeks & Co, Chicago. 1896.

8. SONNETS OF SORROW AND TRIUMPH, George H. Doran & Co, New York. 1918.

9. THE WORLDS AND I, George H. Doran & Co, New York. 1918.



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Ella loses her beloved husband, Robert

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begin calling her "The Lunatic's Own."

The spiritual world continued to intrude upon and shape Ella's life. A fortune-teller once predicted that Ella would soon be surrounded by kings and queens and all manner of royalty. Ella scoffed at this, but within days she was in England to witness the funeral of Queen Victoria and her position was so close to the procession that she could have reached out and touched half the kings of the world. On a return voyage from the West Indies, Ella asked someone to read her "tea-cup." She was told that she would stay home for a very short time and then leave again on a sea voyage that would last over a year. This came about when Ella's mother died just as Ella returned home. To recover from this loss, she and Robert took a sea voyage around the world, to Ceylon and Java, India and Japan.

Ella's views of death are some of the most striking examples of her poetry and much of it was based on her own experiences. Four times in her life up to this point, she was actually with a person as they died.

In Jamaica, Ella met Jack London and his wife and they become good friends. Later in life, Ella and Robert became world travellers and *The Worlds and I* contains some fascinating insights into the condition of women and children in Asia, India, and Africa. Interestingly, Ella Wheeler Wilcox seems to have been one of the first people to advocate home rule for India—in 1911.

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The Ella Wheeler Wilcox Society has chapters in California and a National Chapter. More information can be found on the Ella Wheeler Wilcox web site, currently maintained by Richard A. Edwards. The web site is: <http://192.211.16.13/individuals/edwardsr/ella/ellahome.htm>. This is a nice web site with links to other information about Ella. There is also an e-mail discussion group which you can join by sending an e-mail to: ellawheelerwilcox-subscribe@egroups.com.

All during the winter of 1916, Robert Wilcox had gone about seemingly putting his affairs in order so that Ella would be able to continue after his death. He seemed to have a premonition that he was to die soon and often told Ella that if he went first, that he would try to contact her from beyond and that she should look for him. His premonition came true. He caught a cold in the spring of 1917 and it developed into pneumonia. On May 21, he died, again in Ella's arms.

After Robert's death, Ella went to California in search of a way to maintain contact with the spirit of her husband. This is a remarkable chapter, Ella's own "dark night of the soul." After months of fruitless quests, Ella returned to Connecticut and there she was contacted one night by her husband via the Ouija board. In the presence of several witnesses she brought forth information about those present that

only Robert Wilcox would have known.

She often was seen as quiet and shy. When she met the famed California poet Joaquin Miller, he looked down at her amidst his bushy beard and six-foot four-inch frame, saying, "Why, Elly, I didn't think you were so petite and pinky; I imagined you a big-wristed girl out West milking cows."

But Ella did have a bite to her criticism. Once, when a critic made fun of her song/poem "Mother, Bring My Little Kitten," she replied with another verse, the title suggested by the critic, "Daddy, Do Not Drown The Puppies" but with this wicked last stanza:

*"Save, oh save one puppy,
daddy,*

*From a fate so dark and
grim—*

*Save the very smallest
puppy—*

Make an editor of him."

One of Ella's last books, *Sonnets of Sorrow and Triumph*, is dedicated to her late husband and reflects on Ella's own feelings.

*"One of us two must
sometime face existence*

*Alone with memories that
but sharpen pain.*

*How pitiful, how pitiful it
seems*

*To feed such hunger with
but husks of dream!"*

In 1919, a cancerous tumor was discovered and Ella fought it long and hard, continuing to write nearly up to the day of her death on October 30, 1919. Ella's total output comprised over forty books of poems, stories, and songs.

James P. Roberts is a novelist and owner of White Hawk Press in Madison

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