

Ogden Nash, Master of Light Verse, Dies

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"Pennsylvania" and deprecate a hated herb with the lines "Parsley/ Is gharsley" was a careful craftsman.

Much of his reputation was based on his long, straggling lines of wildly irregular length, often capped with extravagantly misspelled words to create weird rhymes, but they were lines that, on close examination, revealed a carefully thought-out metrical scheme and a kind of relentless logic.

Critic of Frailty

In addition to being a writer of droll and witty verse, however, Mr. Nash was an ingenious critic of frailty and absurdity, whose targets ranged from animals to the income tax to the boring teller of dirty jokes who "trots out a horse of another off-color."

As one critic put it, Mr. Nash was a "a philosopher, albeit a laughing one," who wrote of the "vicissitudes and eccentricities of domestic life as they affected an apparently gentle, somewhat bewildered man."

Finally, Mr. Nash was that rarity among poets, a poet who made an excellent living at his craft. His 20 volumes of verse, with such engaging titles as "You Can't Get There From Here," "I'm a Stranger Here Myself" and "Bed Riddance"—published by Little, Brown & Co.—always sold well.

This fact notwithstanding, in "Everybody Makes Poets," a verse in which he detailed the frustrations of the poet's life, he concluded:

So my advice to mothers is if you are the mother of a poet don't gamble on the chance that future generations will crown him. Follow your original impulse and drown him.

Mr. Nash was born Aug. 19, 1902, in Rye, N. Y. His parents, Edmund Strudwick Nash and the former Mattie Chenault, came from Southern stock. His great-great-grandfather was the Governor of North Carolina during the Revolutionary War, and that ancestor's brother was Gen. Francis Nash, after whom Nashville, Tenn., was named. Ogden Nash was reared in Savannah, Ga., and several other East Coast cities, since his father's import-export business necessitated frequent moves.

Mr. Nash attended St. George's School in Newport,

R. I., and then Harvard College for one year, but had to drop out to earn a living. He taught for a year at St. George's but fled, he said, "because I lost my entire nervous system carving lamb for a table of 14-year-olds." The experience was apparently so traumatic that, in later years, Mr. Nash was noted among his friends for his ragged nerves. He was, moreover, a bit of a hypochondriac—one who, a friend recalled affectionately in 1970, "seemed to enjoy poor health."

Tried Serious Poetry

After St. George's, Mr. Nash worked on Wall Street as a bond salesman, but in two years, he said, he sold one bond—"to my godmother." Next he wrote streetcar advertising, then joined the advertising staff of Doubleday & Page, publishers. On the side, he tried to write serious poetry.

"I wrote sonnets about beauty and truth, eternity, poignant pain," he said. "That was what the people I read wrote about, too—Keats, Shelley, Byron, the classical English poets."

Finally, however, he decided that he'd better "laugh at myself before anyone laughed at me," and he took to writing nonsensical verse. One summer afternoon in 1930, as he sat at his office desk, finding it difficult to keep his mind off the business of writing advertising copy, he had "a silly idea."

Idly, he jotted down some lines of verse, which he soon tossed into the wastebasket.

Later he fished out the paper, titled the lines "Spring Comes to Murray Hill," and mailed the verse to The New Yorker.

The magazine bought the poem, which began:

*I sit in an office at 244 Madison Avenue,
And say to myself You have a responsible job, havenue?
Why then do you fritter away your time on this doggerel?
If you have a sore throat you can cure it by using a good goggerel.*

The poem had the essence of the scores that were to come from Mr. Nash's word-pummeling pen over the years—the near rhymes and the extended line, which he likened to "a horse running up to a hurdle but you don't know when it'll jump."

After selling another poem to The New Yorker, Mr. Nash picked up other markets, and a year later published his first

collection of verse, "Hard Lines." He found that he was by then making more money writing verse—about \$40 a week—than he was in his advertising job, so he quit and went to work full-time for The New Yorker, briefly. From then on he worked as a freelance.

Over the years he turned out hundreds of verses, in part because, he said, "I always fear the wolf at the door." He even composed some lines on the subject, "Hymn to the Thing That Makes the Wolf Go":

*O money, money, money, I'm not necessarily one of those who think thee holy,
But I often stop to wonder how thou canst go out so fast when thou comest in so slowly.*

To keep the money coming in, Mr. Nash annually took to the lecture circuit. Standing before the lectern stoop-shouldered, his oval head dominated by merry eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses, he held his audiences in a continual state of mirth. Although his talks were chiefly readings of his verse, he larded them with gently amusing observations.

On one occasion, for example, he told his audience he did not like the subject of his lecture, which was billed as "Midway Through Nash," supposedly an allusion to the fact he was well into middle age.

"I wish to disclaim all responsibility," he said. "I think the title was dreamed up by my agent, but it has a sort of allimentary or dietary connotation which must be repugnant to the fastidious."

He scheduled his lecture dates so he could travel by train. He hated airplanes, and wrote in one of his verses:

I think progress began to retrogress when Wilbur and Orville Wright started tinkering around in Dayton and Kitty Hawk, because I believe that two Wrights made a wrong.

In the course of a well-paid but frustrating stay in Hollywood, Mr. Nash met S. J. Perelman, who was also there writing for the movies, and they hit on the idea for a musical play. With book by Mr. Perelman, lyrics by Mr. Nash, and music by Kurt Weill, "One Touch of Venus" was a smash hit of the 1943 Broadway season. One of the Nash-Weill songs in it, "Speak Low," has become a standard. Mr. Nash tried his hand at two more musicals, but they were unsuccessful.

He did rather better in television, as a member of panel shows, and the writer of verses set to Saint-Saëns's "Carnival of the Animals," Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" and Dukas's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice."

Mr. Nash lived for several

years in New York, and he maintained a summer home in Little Boar's Head, N. H., but his permanent home was Baltimore. There, in the study of his stone house in the Roland Park section, he wrote his satiric verse in longhand, using a pad of yellow lined paper.

Mr. Nash said he never

crossed out words, but simply erased a wrong word and searched for the right one. "Sometimes a poem is suggested by some human foible," he said, "and sometimes by the play on words. I'm very fond of the English language. I tease it, and you tease only the things you love."

He could be extraordinarily teasing when he rhymed "lullaby" with "gullaby" in a poem about birds, and "lioness" with "your hioness." One of his most hilarious verses concerned a Mr. Schwellenbach, an extremely careful driver, who was hit by another car and "knocked from here to hellenbach."

He was partial to limericks, an example of which is "Arthur:"

*There was an old man of Calcutta,
Who coated his tonsils with butta,
Thus converting his snore
From a thunderous roar
To a soft, oleaginous mutta.*

Issues of the moment and of the time were Mr. Nash's stocks in trade. In "City Greenery" he mused on the perils of urban living:

*If you should happen after dark
To find yourself in Central Park,
Ignore the paths that beckon you
And hurry, hurry to the zoo,
And creep into the tiger's lair.
Frankly, you'll be safer there.*

And in "Baby, It's Calder Outside," he poked unmalicious fun—the only sort he indulged in, really—at contemporary art:

*In addition to beauty and utility
The genuine mobile has mobility.
You know it's art when assorted
metals
Caress your brow like falling petals.*

Mr. Nash could dash off a verse to suit an occasion. Once, after being mistaken for the hundredth time as the author of Dorothy Parker's famous couplet, "Men seldom make

passes/At girls who wear glasses," he came up with his own version: "A girl who is bespectacled/Don't ever get nectacled."

And after his car was rifled in Boston, he wrote to The Globe:

*I'd expected to be robbed in
Chicago,
But not in the home of the
cod.
So I hope that the Cabots and
Lowells
Will mention the matter to
God.*

Mr. Nash threw away witty one-liners in his verse: "Wrong as four martinis at lunch," "I feel as unfit as an unfiddle," "He felt as lonely as Cavalleria without Pagliacci," "Two pints still make one cavort." He once suggested a new slogan for Western Union: "Don't write, telegraph. We'll mail it for you."

Mr. Nash married Frances Rider Leonard in 1931. They had two daughters, about whom he often wrote, but he was obviously not referring to them when he mused, "The interest I take in my neighbor's nursery/Would have to grow to be even cursory."

Sometimes Mr. Nash could be quite serious, as he was in the poem "The Buses Headed for Scranton," but he said the body of his work was "fortunately slightly goofy and cheerfully sour." He said he "intentionally maltreated and manhandled every known rule of grammar, prosody and spelling."

The Times of London missed the point when it reviewed one of his early volumes. "Mr. Nash's verse would be improved if the author took more care with his rhymes," it noted primly.

Mr. Nash, vastly bemused, said, "This comes from a newspaper in a country whose national anthem rhymes 'glorious' with 'reign over us.' By comparison, my stuff is Shakespearean."

He is survived by his widow, his daughters, Mrs. J. Marshall Smith of Sparks, Md., and Mrs. Frederick Eberstadt of New York, and five grandchildren.