

Classic Poetry Series

Ruth Bedford

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Ruth Bedford (2 August 1882 - 24 July 1963)

Ruth Marjory Bedford (1882-1963), writer, was born on 2 August 1882 at Petersham, Sydney, second daughter of native-born parents Alfred Percival Bedford, clerk, and his wife Agnes Victoria who was the seventeenth child of Sir Alfred Stephen. Percy and Agnes were first cousins. With her sisters Sylvia and Alfreda, Ruth was educated at home and grew up in a family that was clannish and prominent in Sydney society. In 1892 she wrote to her mother that she would try to be 'more clever and good', a promise honoured next year with the publication of *Rhymes by Ruth* (revised and reprinted 1896).

She swam regularly with one of her 'closest and dearest friends' [Dorothea Mackellar](http://www.poemhunter.com/dorothea-mackellar/), and the two of them enjoyed play-acting characters they had invented. Ruth's *Sydney at Sunset* and other Verses appeared in 1911. After the death of her mother and a broken engagement, she went abroad in 1912, toured the Continent, shared a flat in London with Dorothea and returned in 1913. They co-authored two light and racy novels, *The Little Blue Devil* (London, 1912) and *Two's Company* (London, 1914), based on their 'play people'.

As a 'children's poet' Bedford published several collections of verse, including *Rosycheeks* and *Goldenhead* (London, 1913) and *Hundreds and Thousands* (1934). At 40, she claimed that she was still able to write with her 'own thoughts of the times of ten or eleven'. One London literary agent rejected her work as 'very slight and almost too innocuous', but the *Brisbane Courier Mail* approvingly remarked that she had 'not been caught in the stream of so-called modernism'. Throughout her long career as a full-time writer Bedford stuck to simple subjects and published seven collections, among them *The Learner and Other Verses* (1937) and *Who's Who in Rhyme and Without Reason* (1948). Her poems appeared in anthologies and in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for thirty years. She also wrote plays: *Postman's Knock* was commended at the Australian Play Society's 1932 competition and several were accepted by the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Photographs taken from adolescence to old age show her strong, rectangular face, dominated by dark eyes and prominent teeth. In 1923 Bedford told *Aussie* magazine that 'children come first in her affections, and then people, books, the stage, surfing, pictures and travel'. A cousin described her as 'sprightly' and forthright. Most of Ruth's life was spent at Edgecliff and Woollahra with her sisters and members of Sydney's literary world. As its secretary, she represented the Sydney P.E.N. Club at a convention in Buenos Aires in 1936; she also belonged to the Women's Pioneer Society of Australasia.

Her last work, *Think of Stephen* (1954), was also her most acclaimed. Sponsored by the Commonwealth Literary Fund, it was a warm chronicle of the domestic and social life of her mother's family, for which Ruth drew on her grandmother's diaries and letters. Professor Kathleen Fitzpatrick, among others, reviewed it favourably, and the book prompted a letter of praise (and an invitation to lunch) from Patrick White. Slowly worn down by illness, Bedford died on 24 July 1963 at Paddington and was cremated with Anglican rites.

Works:

A Family Chronicle (1954)
Rhymes by Ruth

The Witches Song

"Hoity-toity! Hop-o'-my-thumb!
Tweedledee and Tweedledum!
All hobgoblins come to me,
Over the mountains, over the sea:
Come in a hurry, come in a crowd,
Flying, chattering, shrieking loud;
I and my broomstick fidget and call ---
Come, hobgoblins, we want you all!
I have a pot of a mischievous brew;
You must do what I tell you to;
Blow through the keyholes, hang to the eaves,
Litter the garden with dead brown leaves;
Into the houses hustle and run,
Here is mischevous and here is fun!
Break the china and slam the doors,
Crack the windows and scratch the floors,
Let in the cockroaches, mice and rats,
Sit on the family's Sunday hats;
Hiding and stealing everything little,
Smashing everything thin and brittle;
Teasing the children,
Tickling their heels ---
Look at them jumping! Hark to their squeals!
Pinch their elbows and pull their hair,
Then out again to the gusty air!
Flutter the birds in their sheltered nests,
Pluck the down from the ducklings' breasts,
Steal the eggs from the clucking hen,
Ride the pigs round and round the pen!
Here is mischief to spare for all ---
Hoity-toity, Come at my call!
Tweedledum and Tweedledee,
Come at my summons --- Come to me!"
Thus said a witch on a windy night,
Then sailed on her broomstick out of sight.

Ruth Bedford