10th August 2026

Stairs

"[I] sobbed and cursed and kicked the stairs …"

Edna St Vincent Millay, *Grown-Up*

My suggestion recently that "climbing a flight of stairs may be someone's Ben Nevis", reminded me of a conversation I had with a colleague. We were ascending a flight of stairs when I remarked, "Are these stairs steeper than they were the last time we were here, or is it just me?" To which she replied, "It's just you, because, as far as I know, they haven't demolished this place and rebuilt it in the month since our last visit." Oh well … I'll just have to face the fact that stairs *seem* to be steeper these days.

When I was young, I learned this Nursery Rhyme. Didn't you?

> Wee Willie Winkie rins through the toon,
> Up the stairs an' doon the stairs in his nicht-goon,
> Rappin' at the window, cryin' at the lock,
> "Are a' the bairnies in their bed? It's past ten o'clock."

I have no idea who Willie Winkie was, and I suspect the rhyme was used by my mother to encourage (or frighten?) a restless child into going to sleep. But the words didn't just appear out of the ether. William Miller was a 19th century Scottish poet, known as "The Laureate of the Nursery", who was born in Glasgow's Dennistoun. Suffering from ill health and unable to become a surgeon (his career of choice) he took up cabinetmaking and woodturning, and began writing poetry and children's rhymes, mainly in Scots. *Whistle-binkie: Stories for the Fireside* was published in 1842 and contained the rhyme "Wee Willie Winkie". The poem was translated into many languages and made William Miller famous at the time. And yet, following a leg infection, he died destitute at the age of 62.

Could it be that, because William Miller had trouble with his legs, he imagined himself as "Wee Willie" running up and down stairs with no problem at all? In any case, the next time I'm faced with a flight of stairs, rather than sobbing, or cursing, or kicking them as Edna Millay suggests, I'll just sing "Wee Willie Winkie" to myself and maybe I'll get up the steps a little quicker. And while I'm at it, I'll offer a word of thanks for William Miller, Glasgow poet, and others like him, who've given children lovely stories, poems and rhymes, for their lasting pleasure and delight.

A prayer for today

For children, and people who love them, I give my grateful thanks today. Amen

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