

# The Collecting and Use of Historical Children's Books: The Evelyn Bottome Lewis Collection

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The last fifteen years have seen a marked increase in attention given by scholars to the historical study of children's books. For example, Sara Innis Fenwick, in a survey of research completed between 1950 and 1977, analyzed thirty-five dissertations, two master's theses, and one article. Of these thirty-eight titles, which included three "landmark studies" written prior to 1950, thirty-one had been produced between 1965 and 1977.<sup>1</sup> Another indication of the maturing of the subject as a topic of research is shown by the publication of reference works, ranging from Field's *Subject Collections in Children's Literature* (1969) to Welch's *A Bibliography of American Children's Books Printed Prior to 1821* (1972) and Monson's *Research in Children's Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1976).<sup>2</sup>

As literary historians and librarians have given more serious consideration to children's books, so too have social historians begun to study the dynamics of childhood and of family relationships. Most of these studies unfortunately have not utilized children's books and depend upon highly sophisticated social science research methodologies. Nevertheless, they provide useful, if not essential, background material for the study of the books which adults wrote and chose for children.<sup>3</sup>

Mildred M. Seltzer, however, effectively used the W. E. King Juvenile Collection at Miami University of Ohio to document how children learned stereotypes about the concept of aging; and she suggested other questions about the socialization process which could be addressed through the study of children's books.<sup>4</sup> Anne Scott MacLeod has made the most detailed analysis of how children's literature reflects the values of the society which creates it, and in her work on Jacksonian America she was especially attracted by the conventionality of the books, "the very repetition of themes and plots, the very uniformity of outlook that blighted the stories as literature," which had caused previous critics to dismiss the extreme didacticism "as an unfortunate delay in the progress toward a genuine literature for children—a kind of interruption between John Newbery and Lewis Carroll." MacLeod defended her approach with the assertion that

An author's efforts to present young readers with a narrative at once interesting and consonant with accepted values for children yields a work peculiarly reflective of the society's concerns and convictions about childhood, about fiction, about the real and the ideal world.

The result is partly mythic, yet it also represents a very particular kind of reality. It offers a glimpse into the most elusive history of all—the feelings and outlook of people of another time.<sup>5</sup>

To recreate this other time scholars must have the appropriate sources for their work, and as Field's guide to children's literature collections shows the sources are available in a surprising number of libraries. They are there because scholars themselves searched out the materials they required or because perceptive librarians anticipated future research interests and developed institutional collections. In an equal, or perhaps greater, number of cases, individual collectors who succumbed to the "dreadful disease" of book collecting were responsible for preserving the heritage of the past and for providing today's scholars with their sustenance. Margaret N. Coughlan, in a recent issue of *Library Trends*, discussed a number of such private collections, all but one of which now form, or are destined to form, part of an institutional library.<sup>6</sup>

With the 1978 purchase of a portion of the library of Evelyn Bottome Lewis, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte also became a beneficiary of the foresight of a collector. Mrs. Lewis was born in New York City in 1903 and attended private schools in Scarborough-on-Hudson, New York.<sup>7</sup> Her brother described her as "an outstanding student in the classics—English literature, Latin, etc.;" but, because her parents could not afford to send both children to college, Mrs. Lewis learned shorthand and entered the business world immediately after high school graduation. About 1935 her mother opened an antique shop in Darien, Connecticut, and Mrs. Lewis began to assist her in the shop, thus finding an occupation through which she could develop her latent literary and historical interests.

Although Mrs. Lewis eventually became a full-time antique dealer, it was her collecting which gave her her greatest rewards. The way in which her sister-in-law remembers her captures some of the enthusiasm which Mrs. Lewis must have felt for the game of collecting and the joy of possessing: "I can see Evelyn now—pouring over the children's books catalogues and showing the books to us when we came up there each month. She not only knew about the authors—but was just as knowledgeable about the illustrators." Like other dealer/collectors, Mrs. Lewis "squirrelled" away many of her finest books lest in showing them to friends and customers someone might have persuaded her to sell them.

When she died in late 1976, her collection was dispersed. The family retained a number of signed Rackham first editions and allowed a few of her closest friends and fellow dealers to select some of the choicest eighteenth century material, including several books published by John Newbery. Betty Means, then of Norwalk, Connecticut, and now of Charlotte, North Carolina, purchased the remainder of the collection in March, 1977. Between that date and October, 1978, Mrs. Means sold Mrs. Lewis' natural history collection and the majority of her collection of illustrated books, among them many works by Ralph Caldecott.

When the University of North Carolina at Charlotte purchased the Lewis Collection from Mrs. Means in 1978, it contained 196 titles in 204 volumes and a

small quantity of manuscript material. Approximately 40 titles are critical or reference works about children's books and include such rare or semi-rare books as Ashton's *Chapbooks of the Eighteenth Century* (1882), Hindley's *History of the Catnach Press* (1886), Ford's *New England Primer* (1899), and Heartman's *Non-New England Primers* (1935).

The heart of the collection, of course, the 150 books written for the amusement and instruction of children and published, with only a few exceptions, in the United States and Great Britain between 1787 and 1911. The earliest is a copy of the Philadelphia edition of *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* by Dr. John Gregory. The immense popularity of this work, which was first published in England in 1774 and was issued there and in the United States in fifty-six editions by 1841, makes it particularly useful for studying the prevailing conceptions of the roles of women and children and their place in the society of the time.

Of similar interest is a copy of the fifth edition (1791) of Caleb Bingham's *The Young Lady's Accidence: or, a Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar*. Bingham expressed the hope "that a reformation, in favour of female education, is about to take place"; and he told his readers that if females were given adequate education they would soon be recognized as possessing equal abilities with men.<sup>8</sup> Most of the other writers represented in the collection were not so positive in their thinking, and more typical of the sexual stereotyping found in the books was one anonymous writer's insistence that jumping rope was not "proper play for boys."<sup>9</sup>

The most impressive part of the collection for research potential consists of books of similarly anonymous authorship which express equally emphatic judgments about proper conduct. The theme of such books might be summarized as "to be good is to be happy," a motto which appropriately appears on the front cover of the story *The Happy Waterman, or, Honesty the Best Policy*, which was published by Mahlon Day about 1830. The consequences of dishonesty, idleness, conceit, and the simple, undisciplined nature of children are fully described in a series of six 24-page books about Master Henry. In the first episode, Henry's father has just died and he comes to live with his uncle. The tone of the series is promptly set with this description of the boy's character: "Like all little children, whose hearts have not been changed, he was full of evil inclinations, and showed in many ways, when he was only in his fifth year, that his nature was corrupt, and that he, like other children, stood in need both of instruction and punishment."<sup>10</sup> Henry undergoes a number of trials, but the reader is left feeling confident that he will grow up to be a good man, having benefited from his uncle's demanding but kindly tutelage.

The nature of such tutelage derived from the concept of the child as a miniature adult capable of understanding and responding to an extended moral argument. As MacLeod has shown, this concept was founded on the eighteenth century faith in rationality which, while it remained more or less dominant in children's writing up to about 1850, was being superseded in adult literature by the romantic preference for emotion over reason. The rationalistic approach to child nurture is effectively presented in the story "Little George and the Robin." George captures a bird which he intends to keep as a pet, but his mother, who "always tried to persuade her little son to do what was right,"

points out the harm which George may unintentionally inflict on his pet. The boy ponders his mother's words, and, recognizing their wisdom, releases the bird. "That," said his mother, "is the thing I wish you to do, my dear boy; and it gives me more pleasure that you should do it because you think it is right, than that you should do it because I bid you."<sup>11</sup>

As may be apparent from the preceding references, American imprints before 1860 make up the largest single category of titles in the Lewis collection. There are approximately 34 books which were published prior to 1821 and perhaps as many as 80 published between 1821 and 1860. Of these 114 books, only 4 were published outside the Northeast; and a surprising number originated in, or were printed in, such small towns as Weathersfield, Vermont; Pottersville, New Jersey; and Greenfield, Massachusetts. The collection includes 12 books from the press of Samuel Wood and 9 books issued under the McLoughlin imprint as well as examples of the publications of Isaiah Thomas, Day, Munroe and Francis, the American Tract Society, and the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society.

Many of these early books were once the property of Wilbur Macey Stone (1862-1941), a noted collector of children's books, dolls, and toys. The bulk of his book collection is at the Newark Public Library, but Mrs. Lewis acquired thirty-eight volumes formerly owned by Stone. She also obtained a small group of manuscripts and ephemeral items relating to his collecting. This material includes an exchange between Stone and Phillip James and his publishers regarding Stone's loan of books to be illustrated in James' *Children's Books of Yesterday* (1933); newspaper clippings, auction catalogus, and articles about early American children's books, with special attention to horn books; a letter (1898) to Stone from Andrew W. Tuer thanking Stone for a gift; and the auction catalogu (1900) of Tuer's library with names of purchasers and prices noted.

Fiction and fairy tales comprise a significant portion of the Lewis collection, but it contains an almost equal number of books written entirely for instructional purposes. Among these textbooks are copies of Webster's *American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Spelling* (12th ed., 1797); Matthew Carey's *An American Primer* (1813); six nineteenth century editions of *The New England Primer*; an 18-page history of Russia (1826); eight books describing birds and other animals; and a geography of the English counties, illustrated with 400 topographical hieroglyphics (1829).

Mrs. Lewis did not, of course, neglect the classics of children's literature in her collecting. She acquired first or early editions of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, *Eight Cousins*, and *Rose in Bloom*; two editions (1801 and 1834) of Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children*; Dodsley's 1798 critical edition of Aesop and an abridged 1831 American edition; a 1790 French edition of *Robinson Crusoe*; George Cruikshank's *Punch and Judy* (2nd ed., 1828); and, from his Fairy Library series, *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1853). Mrs. Lewis also owned selected works by Samuel Goodrich, including his two-volume autobiography, sample issues of *Peter Parley's Magazine* and *Robert Merry's Museum*, and an 1839 English imitation entitled *Peter Parley's Visit to London during the Coronation of Queen Victoria*. In addition, her collection includes single books, usually in American editions, by Sarah Trimmer, Mrs. Sherwood, Ann and Jane Taylor, John Ruskin, and Isaac Watts.

In his reflections on his sister's collecting, Mr. Chester Bottome expressed his regrets that Mrs. Lewis lacked sufficient background and opportunity to write about the books she knew so well. Through her collecting, however, she has left a legacy which will enable others to fulfill the ultimate purpose of acquiring books—to understand the past and to communicate that understanding to others.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Sara Innis Fenwick, "Scholarly Research about Historical Children's Books Published in Library Science, English, Social History, Psychology, and Art," *Library Trends* 27 (Spring, 1979): 529-49.
2. Carolyn W. Field, ed., *Subject Collections in Children's Literature* (New York: Bowker, 1969); d'Alte A. Welch, *A Bibliography of American Children's Books Printed prior to 1821* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1972); Dianne L. Monson and Bette J. Peltola, *Research in Children's Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1976). Among the many other titles which could be mentioned are Virginia Haviland, *Children's Literature: A Guide to Reference Sources* (Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress, 1966, with supplements in 1972 and 1977); John M. Shaw, *Childhood in Poetry; a Catalogue . . .* (10 vols.; Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1967-); Library of Congress, Rare Book Division, *Children's Books in the Rare Book Division of the Library of Congress* (2 vols.; Totowa, N. J.: Roman and Littlefield, 1975); and Anne Pellowski, *The World of Children's Literature* (New York: Bowker, 1968).
3. See, for example, Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg, eds., *The Family in History: Interdisciplinary Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Phillippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Knopf, 1962); Robert H. Bremner, ed., *Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History* (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970-1974); Kenneth Keniston, "Youth as a Stage of Life," *American Scholar* 39 (Autumn, 1970), 631-54; John Demos, "The American Family in Past Time," *American Scholar* 43 (Summer, 1974) 422-46; and Arlene Skolnick, "The Family Revisited: Themes in Recent Social Science Research," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5 (Spring, 1975): 703-19.
4. Mildred M. Seltzer and Robert C. Atchley, "The Concepts of Old: Changing Attitudes and Stereotypes," *Gerontologist* 11 (Fall, 1971): 226-30; Mildred M. Seltzer, "Using Library Collections in Social and Behavioral Science Research," *Journal of Library History* 11 (July, 1976): 256-61.
5. Anne Scott MacLeod, "Education for Freedom: Children's Fiction in Jacksonian America," *Harvard Educational Review* 46 (August, 1976): 428-29. See also her *A Moral Tale: Children's Fiction and American Culture, 1820-1860* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1975).
6. Margaret N. Coughlan, "Individual Collections," *Library Trends* 27 (Spring, 1979): 431-42.
7. The biographical information which follows is taken from a letter of W. Chester Bottome to Betty L. Means, November 22, 1978 (copy in the author's possession) and from conversations with Mrs. Means.
8. Caleb Bingham, *The Young Lady's Accidence: or, a Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar* (5th ed.; Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1791), vi. This book was published in 20 editions by 1815 and at one time was the only grammar used in the public schools of Boston. Cf. John Tebbell, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* (3 vols.; New York: Bowker, 1972-), I, 553-54.
9. A Friend of Youth, *The Picture Reader; Designed as a First Reading Book for Young Masters and Misses* (New Haven: S. Babcock, 1833), p. 8.
10. *Master Henry's Arrival, and the Alarm* (Troy, N. Y.: Merriam & Moore, n. d.), p. 18.
11. MacLeod, *A Moral Tale*, 152-59; *The Broken Flute, Little George and the Robin, and The Beggar Woman* (Boston: Munroe and Francis, n. d.), pp. 19-20.