

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Mother Goose In the 19th Century

It is the Christmas season when many of us are thinking about books – books suitable for children yesterday, today, and tomorrow – books as gifts, and books of historic value. I have before me an exact reproduction of the text and illustrations of the only true Mother Goose Melodies which was published and copyrighted in Boston in the year 1833, with introduction by the Rev. Edward Everett Hale, D.D.

The Rev. Mr. Hale tells of Mother Goose in the 19th century – the Mother Goose on which the old Boston line was brought up – a line now nearly forgotten. The center of the baby life of this race, he wrote, was Mother Goose's Melodies in the dear little quarto edition, of which a precise copy was in his hand as he wrote.

In the years from 1800 to 1820 the impression of what some still call "Mother Country" was very strong in Boston. Children played the game of English origin, "Lady Queen Anne, she sits on her throne," though it was many years after the Declaration of Independence. Most children who sing the song Queen Anne in Boston or elsewhere today have not the slightest idea, I suppose, of who Queen Anne was.

"The truth is," Dr. Hale wrote, "Boston was still a place of foreign commerce. Our ties with London, such as John Adams and the other revolutionaries spoke of so freely, still existed, and a baby's song book like Mother Goose, might still recall, and I suppose repeat, the songs of Cockney homes." So in Boston town the baby is still sung to sleep with London ditties.

London Bridge is broken down,

Dance over my Lady Lee,

London Bridge is broken down

With a fair Ladye.

All these quaint melodies were sung to New England children and came west with those New Englanders, for they were sung to me without note or comment, and with no other explanation. But as Dr. Hale comments: "The American traveler who goes to Baring Brothers, Bishopsgate, with his credit, feels a thrill which the clerk who attends him does not understand if one speaks to him of St. Helen's or St. Ann's."

All this accounts for Mother Goose as Thomas Fleet, her husband, reprinted her baby songs as early as the year 1700. Probably the very latest verses to be found in the old volume before me, are those of Scott's Donald Dhu. Walter Scott wrote this in 1816 for an anthology. The presence of those verses fixes the latest date of any lines in the collection, our informant tells us, except the line Boston Town which had been changed to Boston City, so that must have been written after 1822.

Each melody in the small book is illustrated with admirable designs which are distinctive to this old edition. The name of Abel Bowen is signed to one, and his initials appear on several. Nathaniel Dearborn or the initials N.D. are signed on several. One is signed "Cricket."

Abel Bowen, the first wood engraver recorded among the engravers in the period after the Revolution, should probably be credited with the greater number of the unsigned illustrations. He gave to childhood his first and best images of blackbirds baked in a pie and the man in the moon, hanging with one arm to the crescent of the moon.

In 1833 when the only true Mother Goose was published the Boston Transcript printed the history of the Goose family – for it was a real family. Mother goose said in those long years ago when told that her melodies should be laid aside for more learned books: "Fudge! I tell you that all their batterings can't deface my beauties, nor their wise pratings equal my wiser prattlings: and all imitators of my refreshing songs might as well write a new Billy Shakespeare as another Mother Goose – we two great poets were born together, and we shall go out of this world together."

"No, no, my Melodies will

never die,

While nurses sing or babies

cry."