

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Yes, There Really Was A Mother Goose

I wonder how many little boys and girls will receive a book of Mother Goose melodies this Christmas of 1964? When the grown-ups of yesteryear were young there was always a bright and shiny book of the old-fashioned Monterey Goose rhymes under the Christmas tree and they were read to the children of the household over and over again by an adored mother, grandmother or great aunt, as it was in my case.

Today, just a day before Christmas, I will tell you of the real Mother Goose, for there really was one. I visited her grave in the old Granary burial grounds in Boston, Mass. a few years ago, and I remember what a nostalgic feeling I had as I stood there realizing that there really was such a person and that I had really known her intimately as a small child in California.

In my library I have a copy of Mother Goose Melodies, an exact reproduction of the text and illustrations of the original edition published and copyrighted in Boston in the year 1833 by Munroe & Francis with introduction by Rev. Edward Everett Hale, DD. My copy was published in 1905, measures 5 ½ by 4 ½ inches and is fully illustrated with original black and white drawings, a precise copy of the original.

The Boston Transcript many years ago carried this story:

“Who was Mother Goose and when were her melodies first given to the world? Many persons imagine that Mother Goose is a myth and no such person existed. This is a mistake.

“Mother Goose was not only a veritable personage, but born and resided many years in Boston. The last that bore that ancient paternal name died about the year 1807, and was buried in old Granary Burying Ground, where probably lie the remains of the whole brood, if we may judge from the new numerous gravestones which mark their resting place. The family probably came from England about 1656. They were landowners in Boston, so early as 1660.”

The first book known to be published in this country bears the title of “Songs for the Nursery; or Mother Goose’s Melodies for Children.” Something probably intended to represent a goose, with a very long neck and mouth wide open, covered a large part of the title page, at the bottom of which “printed by T. Fleet, at his

printing house, Pudding Lane, 1719. Price two coppers.” Several pages were missing, so the whole number could not be ascertained.

This T. Fleet, according to Isaiah Thomas, was a man of considerable talent and of good wit and humor. He was born in England, and was brought up in a printing office in the city of Bristol, where he afterward worked as a journeyman.

He made his way to this country in 1712 and established a printing office in Pudding Lane (now Devonshire street), where he printed small books, pamphlets, ballads and such matter. It was not long before he became acquainted with the “wealthy Goose family,” a branch of which he had before known in Bristol.

By the record of marriages in the city registrar’s office, it appears that in “1715, June 8, was married by Rev. Cotton Mather, Thomas Fleet to Elizabeth Goose.”

The happy couple took up their residence in the same house with the printing office in Pudding Lane. In due time a son and heir arrived, Mother Goose, like all good grandmothers, was in ecstasies at the event; her joy was unbounding; she spent her whole time in the nursery, singing the old songs or reciting rhymes, much to the annoyance of Fleet, but finally he contrived to induce some good.

He conceived the idea of collecting the songs and ditties as came from Mrs. Goose and such as he could gather from other sources and published them for the benefit of the world—not forgetting himself. This he did, and thus Mother Goose’s Melodies were brought forth.

Three wise men of Gotham

Went to sea in a bowl,

And if the bowl had been stronger

My song would have been longer.