BOOKWOMEN

Print Culture History in Modern America

BOOKWOMEN

Creating an Empire in Children's Book Publishing, 1919–1939

Jacalyn Eddy

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To my father and first history teacher,
Charles Nelson Eddy,
for believing the rose blooms twice,

AND

In memory of my mother,
Nancy Kerns Eddy,
who inspires me, still.

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BOOKWOMEN

Introduction

In a wide variety of retail settings across the nation, children's books are so ubiquitous as to be nearly invisible. Perceived by many adults as an important aspect of child culture, they are taken for granted. Some of these books have proved remarkably durable, continuing over the years to delight thousands—probably millions—of children. The books of E. B. White, Kate Douglas Wiggin, Kenneth Grahame, Laura Ingalls Wilder, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dr. Seuss, and others remain reassuringly constant, having attained the mysterious stature of "classic" that denotes an imprecise combination of a book's age, profit history, and "timelessness."

Less ambiguous than the definition of a classic children's book, however, is the fact that the authors and illustrators who created them were (and are) supported by individuals, with contingent interests in the book publishing enterprise, who help ensure the success of books by producing, promoting, and evaluating them. Historically, such individuals considered themselves "bookmen," denoting a passionate devotion to and substantial knowledge of books. This study considers a group of female bookmen—I call them "bookwomen"—whose persistent and innovative efforts helped to shape the specific economic and cultural niche of the modern children's book industry between 1919 and 1939. The group consists of two librarians, Anne Carroll Moore and Alice Jordan; two editors, Louise Seaman Bechtel and May Massee; and the two founders of the important children's periodical the *Horn Book,* Bertha Mahony and Elinor Whitney Field.

The institutions bookwomen represented were situated in a complex historical moment that is particularly rich for investigation, in part because of widespread contemporary concerns about children. A growing number

of self-identified experts had sustained their agitation on behalf of "good" books for children for several decades in the late nineteenth century. While their efforts had been far from successful, since young people did not discontinue reading serial and pulp fiction in favor of books with more erudite and uplifting themes, the campaign on behalf of children was in full swing by 1919. It was framed by a view of childhood, first, as a distinct time of life with unique social and cultural requirements, and second, as an inherent right in need of protection. These concepts, and the reforms stemming from them, represented one way in which America's more affluent citizens articulated their vision of the world, simultaneously satisfying a culture-wide demand for expertise and specialization in the early twentieth century. Bookwomen were part of the advance guard of the crusade to ensure that children received what they regarded as the best reading material possible, affirmed in their efforts both by personal conviction and by discursive communities within their institutions. So affirmed, bookwomen engaged in a variety of activities that exerted substantial influence over the institutions in which they worked and the book-buying public.

Yet, much more was at stake for bookwomen than the quality of children's books. However important that was to them, they were also interested in building their own careers. This study, therefore, investigates ways in which bookwomen helped to alter permanently not only the infrastructure supporting the production of children's books but also the American workplace for women during the early twentieth century. In some instances, bookwomen achieved professional identity by seeking admission to professions heretofore closed to them; in others, by expanding—or transgressing—boundaries of careers already open to women. In either case, their strategies are significant markers in understanding women's relationships to each other and to society.

The debate over women in the American workplace had stretched from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, but during the period between the two world wars it intensified, kept alive in periodicals prominently featuring articles warning the public about the dangers of women in the workforce. A repertoire of explanations for this existed: working women were more likely to bear unhealthy children, working women might consciously limit their family size, home life would suffer. During the 1920s, middle-class periodicals like *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Harper's* routinely described the social consequences of working, urging women to surrender their career aspirations and return to traditional domestic responsibilities. Themes of imperiled physical health were expanded to suggest that women

who chose work over traditional home life were "unnatural." For married women especially, the message was clear: a woman must choose between a family and a career.[1]

In the midst of this debate, however, women were achieving higher educational levels than ever, and new professional opportunities for them emerged. Editorship, to which a substantial part of this study relates, provides one example. Driven largely by a proliferation of print and specialized knowledge that necessitated area-specific experts, the appearance of the modern editing profession near the end of the nineteenth century signaled an important change in the organizational structure of modern publishing. As a new layer of middle management, editorship opened career opportunities within an industry traditionally noted for its tight, often nepotistic, control over meaningful decision making, and women were hard-pressed to gain access to them. In the case of publishing, it had not been unusual to find women in publishing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but their presence had become increasingly rare during the nineteenth century. A few women, certainly, attained successful careers in publishing, frequently as a result of kinship ties with the publisher, but the industry did not offer real professional opportunities to most, or even many, qualified women until the 1920s, a decade of particular prosperity for the publishing industry.

Despite such gains, it is nonetheless true that educated women in the 1920s were more likely to marry than in the previous generation, resulting in an overall decline of females in the workforce. Moreover, while women pursued college degrees as never before, education did not necessarily translate into careers outside the narrowly defined boundaries of "women's work." Nearly 40 percent of educated women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries entered teaching, either for long- or short-term employment. Social work was also available, a vocation popular with educated progressive reformers who did not wish to become teachers, along with nursing and librarianship. Thus, women faced a workforce offering severely limited options despite unprecedented levels of education.

Several arguments have evolved to explain women's exodus from the workplace during the 1920s. Primary data drawn from studies about women's career aspirations convinced some mid-twentieth-century historians that the departure was the result of the alleged sexual revolution. Other midcentury historians attributed the diminishing presence of women in the workplace to disillusionment with suffrage and its failure to produce the job satisfaction and sociopolitical changes many women

had anticipated. Disappointed, the narrative went, women reverted to traditional female roles as wives and mothers.

More recently, historians have disputed the theory of disillusionment, insisting that it does not fully explain female professional life during the interwar period. The result of seeking more detailed explanations about who stayed in careers, why, and how they managed to do so has been a valuable literature examining such topics as the relationship of male professional authority and family claims to women's careers, the impact of professional associations and mentoring on career women, and the sometimes precarious balance between the old female ideal of public service and the new ideal of professionalism.[2] This study contributes to that dialogue.

As a corollary, this study also engages the longstanding issue of professional ghettoization. It is clear enough that entering child-centered careers was frequently an evolutionary process rather than one of forethought and decision; women were sometimes channeled into careers they did not necessarily desire. Several bookwomen would have preferred careers unrelated to children but considered them unattainable. Instead, they entered child-related careers either because they lacked the financial means to pursue their primary interests or because they were "guided" into them by the cultural institutions within which they worked. Evidence dealing with bookwomen suggests that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, career-minded women were most likely to achieve and maintain professional success when their careers accommodated the prevailing social belief that women possessed special nurturing qualities and an innate knowledge of children. As nurses, teachers, social workers, and librarians, women generally found the comfort of social approval, and the early careers of the bookwomen in this study reflect the effectiveness of this strategy.

To accept the traditional narrative that women were merely forced into unwanted careers, however, simplifies a complex phenomenon. An examination of bookwomen contradicts the notion that child-helping careers necessarily led to a professional "dead end." By organizing their professional lives around children and cooperating with generally accepted beliefs about "women's work," bookwomen were rewarded with relative (and highly coveted) autonomy within their work environments, a crucial precondition for genuine professional authority. Authority, however, also derived from "pioneership," a concept with deep resonance in American culture and not necessarily easy to claim in child-centered careers. That authority rested both in adherence to tradition and in claims to

"firsthood" is highly significant to the story, creating tensions difficult and often impossible to reconcile.

While it seems unlikely that bookwomen could have anticipated the impact of their career strategies on expanded options for future generations of women, their willingness to mentor younger colleagues suggests a level of awareness of their significance to professional women. Recognizing that professional survival was linked to identity creation, bookwomen actively participated in shaping their unique place among child experts rather than passively accepting widespread notions of "women's work" or roles as pawns of ill-defined "market forces." By consistently expanding the boundaries of their careers, becoming active agents in market creation, participating in establishing the standards, credentials, and rewards defining their professions, and promoting new talent in the field, bookwomen simultaneously reinforced the importance of their roles in the literary world. As critics, bookwomen enhanced the visibility of women in literary careers. As authors, they had an impressive publishing record, ranging from fantasy to literary criticism. Five are the authors of what Betsy Hearne and Christine Jenkins have called "sacred texts," the canon of modern children's literature.[3]

The process of creating or augmenting professional identity relied partially upon appropriating traditional material and cultural structures, such as publishing firms, libraries, literary criticism, and book reviewing, and ownership of bookshops and printing presses. Once on the inside of the well-established and well-organized apparatus of book production, bookwomen interacted with it in innovative ways, exercising liberty to move outside existing publishing structures whenever those structures proved inadequate to their purposes. Unlike their female counterparts in what Robyn Muncy has called the political "dominion" of children's work, bookwomen were not constrained by legally mandated lines of authority.[4] The luxury of such fluidity allowed them to reconfigure space, both literally and figuratively, in which to negotiate their authority.

One specific consequence of this fluidity was the establishment of the *Horn Book,* a periodical without precedent in American publishing. Founded in 1924, and ostensibly a "children's magazine," the *Horn Book* became the fulcrum for bookwomen's community of practice and a critical site of affirmation for them at a time when no other such forum existed. As the *Horn Book*'s founding generation, they dedicated the magazine to discussing struggles and celebrating achievements among themselves and among those striving for literary success as children's authors, illustrators,

and editors. As a critical component in the professionalization of bookwomen at the time under investigation, therefore, the *Horn Book* figures prominently in this study.

In the 1930s, pressure on women to abandon their careers intensified. The impact of the Great Depression on female employment is indisputable, but additional factors help to explain why some women lost ground in the workplace during this decade. Basing claims to authority on inherent female knowledge of children became increasingly precarious throughout the 1920s, relentlessly assaulted by those child experts who preferred scientific certainty to what they considered maternalist platitudes. On the surface, at least, the target of this attack was motherhood, historically linked to instinctual knowledge of children. By extension, however, any woman's claim to special knowledge of children became dubious, including those in professions related to children. "Natural" knowledge, heretofore a typical and fundamental element in professional identity among women, was thus compromised, leaving those professionals, including bookwomen, challenged to clarify the basis of their authority. Confronted directly by the growing popularity of, and demand for, professions based on scientific knowledge, bookwomen responded to the issue, in general, by ignoring it, determined to cling to their particular vision of childhood. In the short run, scientific knowledge seemed to prevail; physicians and psychologists, often male, replaced mothers and female reformers as the acknowledged authorities over children, resulting in the apparent loss of women's most traditional source of power. Taking the long view, however, challenges to "natural" knowledge helped to dislodge assumptions about what constituted appropriate careers for women; if women had no particular special knowledge of children, then society had no particular reason to assume that certain careers were "women's work."

Over the years, the bookwomen discussed here have received varying degrees of attention. Biographies of Moore and Mahony, although quite useful, were written by colleagues and therefore bear the marks of personal knowledge and friendship. More recently, scholars have situated some members of this group within other groups of bookwomen. Margaret Bush, for example, grouped three of the women discussed here with another early librarian, Caroline Hewins.[5] The particular group configuration offered here is unique and intended to enrich rather than contradict other group arrangements. Indeed, many circles existed, typically in overlapping and dynamic relationship to each other, making multiple membership quite likely. But however they are grouped, bookwomen generally inspire many

questions, succinctly captured by Rita Smith in an article entitled "Just Who Are These Women?"[6] Kay Vandergrift and Jane Anne Hannigan also raise questions when they challenge scholars to investigate the nature of bookwomen's professional power and decision making, the criteria for their success, and their relationships to youth and to each other.[7] Such questions have produced a growing body of research designed to restore literary women to the historical record and to understand them with a depth worthy of their contributions.

I undertook this project largely because, while these particular bookwomen have been recognized, their collective story is scattered; they are everywhere, and nowhere. Despite the substantial trail of information they left behind, they remain as much literary folklore as scholarship, in part because of the very trail itself. Personal correspondence among bookwomen, for example, upon which a significant part of this study turns, contains minor discrepancies over dates; friends whose primary purpose was not attention to historical accuracy wrote much of it from memory, making it difficult at times to understand the precise flow of events. This fact, however, should not deter scholars' attempts to assess the significance of bookwoman culture.

Such discrepancies, in fact, are not the only way language presents a problem to the researcher. In 1946, the famous illustrator James Daugherty complained to Bertha Mahony about "the rosy school of criticisms" he detected in the *Horn Book*.[8] The diplomatic but straightforward remark aptly captures a central tension surrounding bookwomen: the class discourse of power and the gender discourse of politeness were often difficult to merge. Subscribing to the culture of their middle-class status also involved performing the role of "woman"; thus, "niceness," "mannerliness," and "civility" set the boundaries of their language and social behavior. They consistently situated the terms of their discussion in an older, romantic tradition, relying on vague and ill-defined language; how does one measure "joy," "beauty," or "happiness"? In the minds of bookwomen, the meaning of such language was self-evident, regularly employed, for example, by preachers or politicians. But beneath the soft metaphor deemed appropriate for their gender lay a not-so-soft meaning circumscribed by class: "beauty" and "joy" were defined by the affluent and educated class.

The irritation scholars sometimes feel about such propriety reveals more about current cultural attitudes than it does about the past. Bookwomen and a good many of their contemporaries, weaned on republicanism, were not as troubled by the notion of elitism as we are today. Just as

individuals were not equally equipped for roles of political leadership, neither were they equally equipped for literary leadership. To be sure, the opinions of ordinary citizens were a factor for consideration, but as the republic was based on enlightened statesmanship, the republic of letters was based on enlightened bookmanship. This attitude was fully consistent with deeply embedded political culture.

Still, Daugherty's frustration over the seeming contradiction between "rosy" and "criticism" raises a question for the historian as well: how seriously are we to take the polite, at times precious, language of bookwomen? Does it constitute meaningful discourse among colleagues in the process of honing professional skills? What are we to make of language that is at once hopelessly vague and forcefully presumptive? When bookwomen spoke of "good" books, interpretation rather than uncritical acceptance becomes the scholar's task: what *were* "good" books to bookwomen? Qualities such as imagination, creativity, or timelessness were praised, but do little to decode the meaning.

Many of the books of which bookwomen approved were part of the Western European—and especially British—literary tradition. Thus, the authors and illustrators held in high regard by bookwomen included individuals such as Rudyard Kipling, Beatrix Potter, Randolph Caldecott, Leslie Brooke, Walter Crane, Kate Greenaway, Arthur Rackham, and Kenneth Grahame. They also esteemed highly works not specifically written for children but considered "classic," including the authors and illustrators of America's first so-called golden age, such as Louisa May Alcott, Joseph Altsheler, Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, Jessie Wilcox Smith, and Kate Douglas Wiggin. Conversely, bookwomen disliked sectarian or sentimental books, or those espousing violent or criminal behavior. They approved of certain kinds of realism but preferred books that avoided controversial themes, such as divorce, alcoholism, child abuse, or poverty. Traditional stories, such as medieval folktales, were encouraged, along with healthy doses of fantasy.

Bookwomen's speech also frequently employed metaphors that, like their imprecise language, carried a naïve presumption of self-evidence. Simple, easily comprehended, and deeply resonant to most readers, the metaphors typically included images of nature (forests, streams), place (gates, bridges), or movement (paths, roads). An example from the *Horn Book* illustrates the point. In 1925, the magazine claimed that the best books written for children were like "broad meadows, and woodlands rich in spruces, hemlock, beech, oak, and birches, with riotous brooks flowing

through, and boulders adding to the interest of the landscape. Or they are like the ocean with its bold waves and windswept sky, and its calm blueness of sunshiny days."[9]

The power of these tropes rested in their simplicity and universality, qualities that eased the tension between the popularization and monopoly of knowledge. As Joanne Brown notes, metaphor "advertises without disclosing, and sells without delivering." Thus, in the very vagueness of the metaphor lay its capacity to encourage approval and diminish difference.[10] Consensus, even if chimerical, was important for professional identity creation, and language was a key element in achieving it.

This palpable consensus exasperated Daugherty and left bookwomen vulnerable to charges of elitism. The group has, in fact, been noted for its homogeneity, a "closed world" that virtually always agreed about what constituted "good" reading and, in fact, constituted a "metaphorical matriarchy."[11] Apparent consensus among bookwomen derived from what Anne Scott MacLeod refers to as an "implicit code of values" among its members.[12] Beneath the surface of vague metaphor, in other words, lay specific criteria for good books understood by all bookwomen.

The values binding the group together stemmed, in part, from similar cultural and class backgrounds. Most of the six bookwomen were native New Englanders, born between 1870 and 1894 and raised in relatively affluent circumstances. They shared similar recollections of childhood literacy and began their professional lives in other fields, primarily teaching. Three of the six married relatively late, and none had children. Although members of the "inner circle" brought to the book field different educational preparations, a powerful insistence on the necessity of "good" books for children provided one remarkably durable link. Thus, the professional titles of the bookwomen in this study—librarian, editor, bookseller—obscure fundamentally similar cultural beliefs about books, reading, and reading markets that undeniably led to intimate and enduring bonds, both personal and professional. Over time, the relationships among them were enriched by their comprehension of those bonds that contributed to an ability to smooth the rough edges of professional territorialism and establish common ground.

Still, even granting similarities of class, upbringing, and cultural values, the existence of a "metaphorical matriarchy" among bookwomen is somewhat astonishing given the traditional antagonisms of their professional fields. Librarians frequently accused publishers and booksellers of succumbing to a naked profit motive; publishers and booksellers accused

librarians of idealistic (and unrealistic) attempts to remain disconnected from market concerns and overbearing self-righteousness in their attitude toward America's publishing industry; even publishers and booksellers, who might be expected to be allies, frequently argued over books.

This study reveals that relationships among bookwomen were more complex than consensus theories have suggested. Polite language notwithstanding, the group represents more than a mutual admiration society and its tensions more than simple personality clashes. Their relationships demonstrate remarkable range, shifting from periods of alliance to episodes of dispute. Bertha Mahony and Alice Jordan, for example, were friends and allies from the start, despite sharp personality differences. On the other hand, the relationship between Anne Carroll Moore and Louise Bechtel remained significantly defined by professional territory, while Mahony and Bechtel gradually developed extensive professional common ground.

In addition to issues arising from the presumed consensus, vagueness, and folkloric features of the bookwomen's language, an understanding of their achievements is further complicated by the traditional narrative of children's book history itself, dominated by a "golden age" conceptual model. In this narrative, the first golden age of children's literature occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the second commenced around the middle of the twentieth. This periodization obscures bookwomen's important contributions to children's literature by relegating them, and the interwar years, to space holding. If, as some insist, a second golden age did occur, it was in no small part the result of the efforts of bookwomen, who established the critical mass of professionals necessary to sustain its momentum.[13]

Despite its limitations, connotations of expansion, colonization, authority, conflict, and cooperation make "empire" a useful trope. In terms of expansion, the study explores the individual careers of the bookwomen, their "guiding hand" in children's book publishing, and their remarkably direct influence on the careers of other bookwomen. The list of editors professionally nurtured by May Massee or Louise Seaman Bechtel is impressive, including Doris Patee, Eunice Blake, Alice Dalgliesh, Margaret Lesser, Dorothy Bryan, Gertrude Blumenthal, and Edith Patterson Meyer. Other editors, such as Marian Fiery, Elizabeth Bevier Hamilton, Margaret McElderry, and Mary Silva Cosgrave, spent their early careers under the supervision of Anne Carroll Moore at the New York Public Library. Still others, like editor Lee Kingman Natti and author Eleanor Estes, recalled the powerful impression left by Bertha Mahony at the Bookshop for Boys and

Girls. Presumably inspired by the success of bookwomen, one editor was, by 1930, bold enough to propose the establishment of a children's department in the publishing firm where she worked.[14]

Nurturing the careers of others, however, did not imply that bookwomen regarded such "outsiders" as equals. They tended to create colonial relationships with the female professionals they nurtured, often by status reinforcement; claiming "pioneership" effectively assigned second-class citizenship to their peers in the children's book industry. More passively, they excluded many talented editors from the "inner circle" by ignoring them. It is fair to say that, while espousing a "reading democracy," bookwomen established hierarchical, though informal, lines of authority among their ranks. Although my discussion of those women marginalized by bookwomen is not extensive, their presence is important, serving as reminders that the six women in this study were by no means the only "bookwomen." The scholarship of Christine Jenkins, Betsy Hearne, Melanie Kimball, and others has made clear that under the strong leadership of other women, such as Frances Jenkins Olcott and Effie Power, children's services in cities like St. Louis, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh were already exemplary by the time the six women under discussion here entered their professional lives.

The study is organized chronologically to demonstrate the expansion of influence and relationships necessary to support the argument for empire building among bookwomen. It is also a useful organizational structure in considering escalating power dynamics among groups of child experts during this period. The first chapter, therefore, situates bookwomen in the broad context of traditional and evolving attitudes about women, children, and reading. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the personal and professional backgrounds of each bookwoman through 1919 and thus are crucial to comprehending later developments. Chapter 5 examines strategies for establishing professional authority, the development of personal friendships, and the relationship of bookwomen to other groups contending for authority over children. Chapter 6 investigates the expansion and consolidation of group identity, the specific influence bookwomen exerted in the publishing industry, and the emergence of the *Horn Book*. Chapter 7 considers bookwomen during the Great Depression, with particular emphasis on the internal discord and external criticism sustained by their community, and their increasingly complex relationship to the marketplace.

By 1939, children's book publishing was recognizably modern, and this change rested, in part, on the creation of a narrative among bookwomen

that began with talking and writing to each other. In this sense, this study is concerned with both a neglected slice of literary life and, more importantly, female friendship. Bookwomen's determined and successful effort to institutionalize the narrative of their relationship to publishing and of their friendships was, at the time, unusual. For this reason, the study's significance does not lie primarily in acclaiming the books they created and advocated, though many of their books have achieved "classic" status. Nor does it rest on exposing elitist cultural beliefs and bizarre personal eccentricities, though these are evident. It lies, ultimately, in the fact that bookwomen, borrowing Carolyn Heilbrun's phrase, "thought of women as 'we.'"[15] That others have recognized this—then and now—is demonstrated by the persistent use of the language of family to depict them. Bookwomen have been called "sisters," "aunts," "matriarchs," "midwives," "foremothers," and "godmothers." It is difficult to say with absolute certainty how bookwomen themselves would respond to these characterizations, but they nonetheless imply a close kinship with the present. This proximity challenges us to restore them to the historical record, not merely as quaint memorabilia or even as exhibits of women's past contributions to national life, but as voices that continue to be worthy of hearing. Beyond language and beliefs that date them to a specific historical moment, the lives of bookwomen contained complicated decisions with sometimes ambiguous outcomes that, in one way or another, remain recognizable today. Their unrelenting concern for youth, in particular, might well continue to resonate in a nation that claims, at least, to value children highly.