

BOOKWOMEN

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

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Building Professional Culture

THE PROSPERITY GEORGE BRETT predicted in 1920 was reflected in book sales, boosted overall by 6 percent throughout the decade. Organizations like the ALA enjoyed taking credit for the new burst of publishing activity for children, but a carefully cultivated foundation of interprofessional relationships fostered by bookwomen was an important component of these gains. During the second half of the 1920s, they continued expanding the institutional apparatus of children's book publishing by consolidating their claims to authority, enlarging the scope of their undertakings, and developing consistent and predictable patterns in their working relationships. Although viewing themselves as liaisons between books and readers, bookwomen also became bridges of a different sort, each in her way connecting bookwomen to the past, to those outside their ranks, and to each other. This was especially evident when they mentored new authors and editors, although, in the process, they cultivated discernible levels of privilege among children's book professionals.

Nearly twenty years older than other bookwomen, Anne Carroll Moore and Alice Jordan were generational bridges. While the two women remained associated with the noncommercial library enterprise, they were astutely, if ambivalently, aware that an expanded market was crucial to enhanced quality for children's books. Jordan's persistence in using the NERTCL as a forum to warm Boston's librarians to the concept of the commercial aspects of children's books demonstrated her awareness of this fact. Perceiving themselves as modern and progressive, Moore and Jordan cultivated friendships with bookwomen whose livings derived from the commercial book trade. Moreover, they supported the younger generation as they esteemed

the older. But despite their resistance to being overly identified with the past and their commitment to mentoring young professional women, their sense of the ideal book nonetheless remained firmly anchored in nineteenth-century British and American children's books. Their attachment to such books reinforced hierarchical thought patterns and compounded the obstacles that new authors faced in making their own mark on children's literature by requiring them to reckon with literary figures and books of the past as standards by which their own work was judged.

Moore's own writing, she believed, lived up to that standard. In 1924, with nearly thirty years of professional life behind her, she seemed at the pinnacle of her accomplishments. In the fall of that year, Putnam distributed *Nicholas* to a warm and enthusiastic reception from Moore's friends.¹ Letters of congratulation poured in from colleagues like Della McGregor, chief of the juvenile division at the St. Paul Library in Minnesota, who started a *Nicholas* diary and invited Moore to visit to receive the keys to the city.² Throughout her life, Moore remained particularly proud of *Nicholas*, recalling its success with great fondness and carrying copies wherever she went.³ Her *Bookman* reviews continued to be widely read as well, and her work in general, one colleague noted, had prompted an interest in children's publishing that "surfaced like a great wave," carrying with it the "authors and artists of enormous gifts" who "rode high on the swing of it."⁴

She continued to be among the core of experts who selected the recipient of the Newbery Medal and, as the acknowledged director of Children's Book Week, her expertise was advertised in the popular as well as professional press. Such magazines as *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal* routinely printed articles about Book Week and employed children's illustrators such as Jessie Wilcox Smith to design covers.⁵ In contrast to the relatively meager and largely local participation characteristic of its early years, Book Week was now a national week-long festival of opportunity for bookwomen to celebrate themselves as much as books. No sooner was one Book Week over, it seemed, than preparations for the next were underway. Women's clubs, civic organizations, and schools promoted bookwomen by their involvement with Book Week; bookshops around the country sponsored plays about the event, performed by youth groups such as the Camp Fire Girls.⁶ Requests multiplied for stickers, posters, and assistance with Book Week plans to which Moore happily responded with advice, speakers, and shipments of exhibits.

Financial opportunities for booksellers also attended the event's success; patrons who attended such special exhibits and plays, frequently sponsored

by department stores such as Lord & Taylor and Wanamaker's, were likely to buy books.⁷ The result was, according to Frederic Melcher, an event "of national proportions," the momentum behind better children's books, a broadened market, a body of literary criticism, and more children's authors. He noted with gratification that the public had, in response to Book Week activities, developed a "new attitude" that embraced contemporary contributions to children's literature.⁸

It seemed clear to Moore that the renaissance she sought in children's book publishing was indeed underway, a situation that represented nothing less than her "dreams come true."⁹ She was so pleased with what she interpreted as considerable progress that by mid-decade she felt inclined to update the nation once more on the state of children's books and began work on *Cross-Roads to Childhood*. But whereas in *Roads to Childhood* she had bewailed a dearth of literary talent for children's literature, she now contentedly reported that children's books had "broken new ground significantly." Further, she argued, "Everybody who is anybody at all is writing a children's book . . . and those who are not writing books are making pictures for them, or are editing the work of their friends."¹⁰ Mahony assured Bookshop patrons that they would "revel" in Moore's new book and feel "urged to take an immediate vacation" to read it.¹¹ It was true, as Moore noted in *Cross-Roads*, that the quantity of book production was trending upward. By the end of the decade, children's book production was up 25 percent over 1920, despite the high initial investment costs to publishers.¹²

Still another professional opportunity came to Moore during the summer of 1924, when Stuart Sherman, editor of *Books*, the literary supplement for the New York *Herald Tribune*, decided that Moore's reputation would be a weighty asset and offered her the job of editing the children's portion of the weekly supplement.¹³ Moore asked for time to consider the offer, and for the next few weeks the "fairy godmother" of children's books compiled a list of contingencies for taking the job, all of which involved control by, or visibility for, Moore.¹⁴ First, no advertising could appear on her page. Second, she would retain control of the book selection process as well as illustrations for the page. Third, she would determine the lead article for each issue. Sherman did not respond immediately, but eventually instructed his assistant editor, Irita Van Doren, to take Moore to lunch and accept her terms. In this instance, the romantic language and traditional metaphors Moore typically utilized to idealize children and their books gave way to the unambiguous language of business negotiation. On the surface a staunch critic of commercialism, Moore demonstrated shrewd business sense when necessary.

Moore called her page “The Three Owls,” and, over the next six years, invited Americans and Europeans to contribute to the column, including Geoffrey Parsons, May Lamberton Becker, Esther Averill, and a cadre of editors, critics, and other book professionals. The column, stretching beyond the brief, annotated listings common in book reviews, presented contemplative narratives about children’s books. Many authors enjoyed the column and remained faithful readers during the six years Moore reviewed for the *Tribune*.¹⁵

Under Moore’s direction, Boris Artzybasheff designed the column’s logo—three owls—to symbolize what she considered the key contributors to children’s books: writer, artist, and critic.¹⁶ The logo was significant on at least two levels. The first was its traditional association with wisdom; the second, equally deliberate, represented her conviction that good children’s books were the outcome of the efforts of a community engaged in “the rarer art of wise leadership and companionship.”¹⁷ The logo connoted not only wisdom, therefore, but an integrated professional community. In much the same way that interdisciplinarity legitimated child guidance, the impression of community enhanced authority for bookwomen. And in a very real sense, the column did enhance professional community by encouraging individuals to “meet” at “The Three Owls” in a figurative sense, as they met at room 105 in a literal one. The column particularly improved Moore’s authority by verifying her influence over literary figures, who contributed to the column only at her invitation. While readers might have been “entranced,” as Rachel Field claimed, authors paid attention to “The Three Owls” for a practical reason as well: a mention by Moore could be critical to a book’s literary prosperity, as in the case of Carl Sandburg, who was absolutely convinced that Moore’s positive notice of *Rootabaga Stories* had been instrumental in the series’ popularity.¹⁸ The *Nation* also voiced its approval of the owls, asserting that Moore’s column “require[s] no comment.”¹⁹

“The Three Owls” was only one example of the increased presence of women in book-related careers. Their presence in bookselling had also increased so dramatically since Mahony addressed the ABA in 1917 that, by mid-decade, women represented nearly half the attendees at the annual conference.²⁰ This prompted *Publishers Weekly* to remark, in 1928, that the increased presence of women was “one of the most significant developments” in bookselling. Furthermore, women not only were in sales but also occupied executive positions. In New York, for example, women headed all book departments in large department stores. By the end of the decade, about a third of new shops were opened by women, an impressive increase from just ten years earlier.²¹

Mahony and Whitney were also bridges among bookwomen, situated between librarians, clinging to an ostensibly noncommercial vision of books, and editors, concerned with profit. The Bookshop's reputation, consistent with Mahony's vision, extended far beyond the reaches of Boston to a nationwide audience by way of its many activities, one of which was the creation of the *Horn Book*, a watershed event for bookwomen and for children's books. From the stops and starts of its early years, the magazine developed a life of its own, growing, as Melcher put it, from "an oversized bookshop newsletter into the all-but-official journal of 'the new children's book movement.'"²² It united individually influential bookwomen, whose opinions were not always consensual, around its "masthead,"²³ forcing them to expand their relationships to each other and to the book world. The *Horn Book* became an important part of that collective professional stage from which bookwomen spoke, vital both for affirming their beliefs and for keeping their agenda before the public. While the Newbery award and Book Week augmented interdisciplinary community, the national scope and infrequency of those events diminished the urgency of ongoing, personal connections; the *Horn Book* actually belonged to bookwomen, as no other event or property did. Although activities intrinsic to the *Horn Book*—book reviewing, for example—were not in themselves new to bookwomen, ownership of a collective professional voice was both novel and path breaking, and the magazine's editors heaped consistent and generous praise on each other as "pioneers." But the *Horn Book*, far from being an organ of simple self-congratulation, became a forum for the uncommon task of narrating women's lives.²⁴

Its life began early in 1924 when it occurred to Mahony that the small book list published by the Bookshop no longer fit a business with national and international ties and aspirations. An expanded, up-scale publication, she believed, was required to reflect those aspirations, but such an enterprise seemed challenging to two women claiming to have little business sense. Yet they believed that an enlarged publication would increase sales at the shop while strengthening the field of children's books. Since adequate profits from the shop had allowed repayment of the entire debt owed to the WEIU in 1923, Mahony once more approached her "university" for financial backing and, once more, received it.²⁵

The fine points of the project, however, were far from clear. In the late spring, therefore, Mahony and Whitney sailed for Europe, during which time most of the details for their new project were settled. Not until they returned in July, however, did they decide upon a name. Evidently the result of a

moment of mutual inspiration, the two women called their new publication the *Horn Book*, a reference to the first books specifically for children beginning in the sixteenth century. To Mahony and Whitney, the name captured the essential qualities of historical tradition and purpose they embraced.

For their logo, Mahony and Whitney selected an adaptation of Randolph Caldecott's nineteenth-century illustration *The Three Jovial Huntsmen*. The huntsmen, in scarlet coats, rode on horseback and blew horns that, as Mahony explained in the first issue, represented the call for better children's books. Like Moore, Mahony selected a symbolic imprint that displayed a community of characters with allied objectives. "Just as [the three huntsmen] are so full of exuberant joy for the hunt that they cannot blow hard enough, so we are full of enthusiasm for the Bookshop as a hunting ground. . . . First of all, however, we are publishing this sheet to blow the horn for fine books for boys and girls—their authors, their illustrators and their publishers."²⁶

Printed on ivory stock with Garamond type, the first issue of the *Horn Book* was released from the presses of Mahony's old friend and Union printer, Thomas Todd, on October 1, 1924. But while, thanks to Todd, she understood printing, Mahony knew little about making a magazine. The first issue contained only twenty-five book reviews, an article contributed by Jordan, and a statement from Mahony indicating uncertainty about the future: "Lest this horn-blowing become tiresome to you or to us, we shall publish *The Horn Book* only when we have something of real interest to say, not oftener than four times a year."²⁷ It does not seem to have occurred to Mahony that indecision about a regular production schedule might affect subscription numbers. Subscribing to the *Horn Book* would have been difficult in any case, since the editors failed to specify the subscription price of fifty cents per year, or fifteen cents a single issue.

Evidently oblivious to these omissions, Mahony and Whitney promptly sent complimentary copies to individuals they felt would appreciate the *Horn Book*, and the response was enthusiastic. Seaman, offering uncritical acclaim, was "thrilled, entranced, excited, inspired," and immediately sent a four-dollar check for subscriptions for eight "delightful human beings."²⁸ At NYPL, Moore subscribed immediately but, characteristically, withheld full approval until 1926, when she felt production and policy kinks had been worked out. Melcher's response was somewhat harsher, gently reprimanding the editors for leaving the final three pages of the *Horn Book* absolutely blank and placing on its back cover only one tiny picture of a schoolgirl holding a hornbook. It was, he suggested, "extravagant."²⁹

The first few numbers varied widely in content and form, as the editors struggled to establish the magazine's identity and gain proficiency in production techniques. The second number, issued in November, contained reviews of more than one hundred books; the March issue was devoted entirely to authors, and offered no book reviews at all. To entice vacationers to the Bookshop and promote its activities, the summer number was dedicated to "Visitors" and stressed books about New England.³⁰ Gradually, however, the magazine settled into a routine. With a more dependable format, including regular tributes to authors and illustrators, and predictable features such as "The Booklist," the *Horn Book* assumed a personality as well as the look of a legitimate magazine rather than an expanded newsletter.³¹ The editors, too, settled into a routine. Responsibilities pertaining to actual production belonged to Whitney, and several employees vividly remembered her at the Bookshop, hour after hour, with a paste pot. Mahony, regarding the *Horn Book* as a "writer's workshop," was clearly in charge of the magazine's content, responsible for soliciting book reviews and articles, although contributors were expected to write "friendly, honest, able and constructive criticism."³² Harshness had no place.

Desiring to get the *Horn Book* off to a good start, Mahony and Whitney established a diverse editorial board whose members brought a broad portfolio of skills. After carefully considering potential candidates, they offered associate editorships to Louise Seaman, Anne Carroll Moore, and Alice Jordan, each of whom brought a particular strength to the magazine. Seaman understood the business of production and was accustomed to making hard, practical business decisions, while Moore's name lent authority to the magazine, reassuring readers that experts were on hand to ensure its literary integrity. Jordan was valuable both to the magazine and to Mahony personally, for her insights about children's views of the books that were offered. Her calm personality and easygoing approach to life offset Mahony's tendency toward nervousness and overwork that sometimes left her mentally and physically exhausted.

Rapidly, the magazine became a focal point for the relationships among bookwomen, creating opportunities for them not ordinarily available in the institutions providing their paychecks. Earlier, those relationships were circumscribed either by professional territory, personal friendship, or a combination of both. But accepting obligations to the *Horn Book* meant that bookwomen no longer had the luxury of communicating only with those of like mind, and consequently their relationships deepened, as evidenced by increasing correspondence and visits. Bookwomen spent a great deal of time

together, working independently and collectively in places like Mahony's rented house on Cape Ann, where the strain of continually protecting one's professional turf might be relaxed.³³ The various institutional cultures to which each bookwoman had successfully adapted—or even manipulated—could be temporarily laid aside in the interest of developing a culture relatively free of the formal institutional demands of their jobs. Mahony's increasing dependence upon her editors for advice and support is one evidence of a personalized culture committed, in some ways, to egalitarian ideals.

The rosy warmth of community and the headiness of idealism, however, were never so absolute among bookwomen as to thoroughly dissolve thought patterns and motives typical of the institutions they represented. The magazine's reliance on division of labor, for example, was characteristic of large business. And though dependent on associate editors, Mahony remained firmly in control of virtually all editorial decisions at the *Horn Book*. Likewise, bookwomen reinforced the influence and prestige of their own institutions in their author tributes. Louise Seaman's tribute to Elizabeth Coatsworth, for example, carried a subtle but useful secondary message: Macmillan produced good authors and books. Moreover, while bookwomen used the new magazine to strengthen institutional connections and relationships, they also used their well-established institutional connections to advocate the new magazine. Moore encouraged libraries across America to subscribe, while Jordan invited Mahony to address the Round Table shortly after the magazine was inaugurated and librarians subsequently considered her—and the *Horn Book*—a “source of inspiration and ideals.”³⁴

Acclaim for the magazine came from other sources as well. Frances Sturges, librarian and bookseller, remarked that librarianship and publishing grew “very close in my day because the *Horn Book* had just started.”³⁵ And although it had been initially skeptical of placing literary criticism on a for-profit basis, the *Christian Science Monitor* praised Mahony and Whitney for refusing to give commercialism precedence. The new magazine was quickly compared to earlier children's magazines, primarily *St. Nicholas*; the *Nation*, in fact, acknowledged that the *Horn Book* had “outclassed its predecessor.”³⁶ Mary Mapes Dodge had developed *St. Nicholas* in accordance with her belief that children's magazines should be a “playground.”³⁷ But while adults reading *St. Nicholas* might be swept back to their own childhood, the *Horn Book* was clearly intended for children. It differed from its predecessor, however, by never drawing the majority of its readership from among children. The magazine was about children but written by,

and frequently for, adults. Children, in a sense, served as grist for book-women's metaphor mill, nostalgically representative of innocence and simplicity—qualities the nation no longer seemed to demonstrate.

The result of such endorsements was substantial growth for the magazine during the first two years, inducing the union to seek copyright and a second class mailing permit for the *Horn Book*. Growth was a mixed blessing, however, compelling Mahony to make changes at the *Horn Book* she did not welcome. Increasing production costs forced her to double the annual subscription rate in 1926 to one dollar.³⁸ Even more reluctantly, she offered advertising space in the *Horn Book* for the first time, still preferring to consider the magazine a work of art, a service to readers, and a partnership with subscribers. Until the mid-1930s, Mahony longed for alternative means of financing the magazine. "We are always puzzling over ways in which we may support [the *Horn Book*] without having advertisements at all."³⁹ In this sense, Mahony illustrated naïveté about (or plain resistance to) market realities, despite ten years as the Bookshop's manager. No doubt, she also resisted advertising because it attached her to the commercialism she claimed to detest. But since the only alternative was a prohibitively priced journal, Mahony issued a cordial statement welcoming advertisers: "The Editors of *The Horn Book* wish to give expression on this page to their enthusiastic appreciation of book publishers. Whether your joy in books be that of scholar, collector, general reader, or bookseller, you obtain that joy thanks to the vision, faith, enthusiasm, and skill of Publishers. . . . As Booksellers as well as Editors we extend to Book Publishers our thanks and our support for their fine books and fine book making, cordial co-operation, fair business treatment, courteous, considerate, and honest wholesale calling."⁴⁰ Behind the surface pleasantries lay clear ground rules for a relationship with the *Horn Book*: cooperation, fairness, courtesy, consideration, and honesty. Furthermore, she informed publishers that advertising space would be available only in the November issue. Publishers were required to submit advertisements that considered and reflected the character of the *Horn Book*, "build[ing] their pages from the standpoint of excellence and permanence."⁴¹ The magazine, she implied, did not exist for publishers, who should instead consider it a privilege to have advertising space from Mahony. But in spite of her determination to keep control over advertising, it was a two-sided coin. Along with new possibilities for expansion emerged new potential for criticism since the twenty-seven publishers who accepted her terms, now paying customers, had interests in the *Horn Book* that did not necessarily correspond exactly—or even closely—to Mahony's vision of community.

If the *Horn Book* was one consequence of outgrowing the Bookshop's original book list and newsletter, *Realms of Gold in Children's Books* was the other. The reasons motivating Mahony and Whitney to inaugurate the magazine in 1924 also prompted them to begin the monumental task of inventorying five centuries of children's literature in July 1927. The purpose of *Realms*, as envisioned by Mahony, was to trace the development of children's literature by compiling a list of children's books. Such a book was without precedent, particularly since the two editors wanted to compile a grand narrative that described children's books "from the first one . . . to the glorious present day."⁴² Much of the book was completed at Mahony's house in Rockport, where Mahony and Whitney agreed to read in its entirety each work to be listed in the book. The proximity of the house to the ocean was alluring, but Mahony noted later that "there was no time to sit on the veranda behind boxes of geraniums and verbena and contemplate the beauty of the wide expanse of ocean and the picturesque town." Instead, the two women worked "harmoniously and with due consideration of each other's opinion and ideas."⁴³

In *Realms*, Mahony and Whitney made their philosophy about children's literature and about reading clear. The book's title was a reference to a poem by John Keats, presented in the opening pages. In introductory remarks, Mahony and Whitney expressed their belief that the twentieth century was a literary "golden age"; waxing poetic, they likened it to a "vein of gold . . . threadlike and hidden at first, but gradually . . . widened, opened, and deepened until this present richness is exposed."⁴⁴ In plainer terms, the editors viewed the Western literary tradition as "gold" (interesting for its connotation implying both wealth and purity), a kind of buried treasure becoming fully apparent in the modern age. In *Realms*, the reader could expect the treasure to be exposed. Ultimately, the book became a way of attaching the writing of bookwomen to the British literary tradition they esteemed so highly.

Genre by genre, the book offered discussions of the "best" literature. Commentary was uncritical since the editors selected only those titles they deemed "good" literature in the first place. Three of the book's sections reveal worldviews that informed the choices of its editors. The first, entitled "Roads to the Past," invoked Moore's favorite metaphor. Mahony ascribed the inspiration for the title, however, not to Moore but to Geoffrey Parsons's *Stream of History*. That book, a brief and synthetic overview of man from amoebic beginnings to the present, delighted Mahony, who viewed the volume as a "great dramatic poem" expressing a "fair and unopinionated"

view of the past. She liked it particularly because Parsons, she believed, presented “the whole great unwieldy mass of history—as a sculptor might take a huge mass of soft clay—and shap[ed] it with care and skill so that it shall present a certain Rodin-like figure of truth.” Parsons, she observed, regarded history as “one unbroken flow . . . always moving onward, not as a series of episodic periods.”⁴⁵ The editors’ unconcealed enthusiasm for Parsons’s writing revealed their uncritical acceptance, first, of a progressive historical model and, second, of the ability to satisfactorily capture historical “truth” in one neat volume.

Metaphor continued in another section, entitled “The Great Gates of the Mountain.” Containing chapters on literature, literary biography, poetry, and the Bible, and given the editors’ love of classic literature, it seems unsurprising that Chaucer, Hardy, Hawthorne, Thackeray, Blake, Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, Austen, Shakespeare, and others of similar literary stature occupied this section. Significantly, however, Mahony and Whitney also placed bookwomen here by including books of literary criticism authored by Moore and a few other individuals such as Frances Jenkins Olcott. Positioning bookwomen in this chapter not only implied a connection to literary figures commonly considered “great,” but also associated them with gates, presumably passages into the “truth.” Anne Thaxter Eaton used the same metaphor when describing the library as a “gateway into a world [children] would not otherwise know.”⁴⁶ Once again, bookwomen utilized metaphors tied to what Moore referred to as “the spirit of place.”⁴⁷

The final section of *Realms*, entitled “This Writing World” (the reference to Untermeyer’s *This Singing World* seems obvious), contained an overview of the specific historical preconditions for recent advances in children’s literature. Opening with a discussion of the pioneering efforts of the children’s library movement, the section then praised the “quiet revolution” among teachers who allied themselves with the library. From there, the editors commented on the influence of bookstores and the foresight of publishers to create distinct departments concerned with children’s book publishing. By inserting them into the forefront of the unfolding story, Mahony and Whitney credited bookwomen with recent improvements in children’s literature. On the very last of its 727 pages, Mahony and Whitney left readers with three specific images: Anne Carroll Moore, the *Horn Book*, and the Bookshop for Boys and Girls. Benediction-like, the book ended with a fourth image: books, Mahony declared, “will add more trees to the slopes of the sacred mountain.” Thus, after celebrating five centuries of the “best” literature, the culminating chapter credited bookwomen with creating the

demand for *Realms* and maintaining the rigorous standards necessary to continue this “rightful heritage.” Mahony and Whitney remained silent about women editors in publishing houses outside New York or Boston, acknowledging only the eight children’s departments located in those two cities.⁴⁸ In a sense, the fact that they privileged New York and Boston mirrored reality, since these cities were indeed the centers of American publishing, but also suggests the degree of narrowness of their particular community of practice.

A year and a half (and several reels of typewriter ribbon) later, Mahony and Whitney presented the ample manuscript to May Masee, who removed almost a quarter of the material but otherwise suggested few editorial changes. The segment Masee removed was placed in a second book, *Contemporary Illustrators of Children’s Books*, printed by Thomas Todd and published by the union a year later. *Realms* was an immediate success, receiving high acclaim from bookwomen. Jordan, a manuscript reader, proclaimed *Realms* so highly creative that she regarded Mahony and Whitney as excessively modest in claiming to be “merely compilers.”⁴⁹ May Lambertson Becker referred to *Realms* as an “affectionate *catalogue raisonnee*.”⁵⁰ Moore simply advised everyone she knew to purchase a copy.

While Mahony and Whitney compiled *Realms*, they also managed a rigorous schedule of Bookshop activities. Intending to shore up what she considered a dangerous flagging of interest in reading, Mahony dispatched union members to junior and senior high schools as storytellers. School administrators were skeptical, feeling that Mahony exaggerated the problem and that no “help” was indicated, but the results were hard to dispute: book circulation at Boston public libraries grew dramatically, causing Boston’s high school English departments to reconsider their response to the program. Mahony, interested in homes as well as in schools, kept parents abreast of new children’s books by offering a series at the Bookshop called “A Pleasure Course.” Seaman and Masee were called on to address attendees, a double blessing for the speakers since they could advertise their own products while encouraging reading.

By authoring *Realms* and launching the *Horn Book*, Mahony rapidly became an important figure in the field of children’s book publishing. As the magazine’s managing editor, she became an editor’s editor, reviewing articles submitted by children’s editors for the *Horn Book*. By 1929, publishing firms such as Scribners sought her advice, asking her to read manuscripts and advise on other publishing matters.⁵¹ She served on the jury of the Beacon Hill Bookshelf, the “great books” series prepared by Little,

Brown, which grew from eight to eighteen volumes by 1927.⁵² By the end of the 1920s, Mahony used her unique and authoritative role in the children's book world both to advance her opinions about "good" reading for children and to expand the influence of the other bookwomen with whom she was closely connected. But prominence in the publishing world did not, apparently, detract from her powerful personal identification with her work. She continued to be a daily presence in the Bookshop, meeting with young children and viewing the Bookshop as a personal as well as professional undertaking. This fact was best captured by the title of an article Alice Jordan wrote in June 1929 for the *Atlantic Bookshelf*: "The Bookshop That Is Bertha Mahony."

Seaman and Masee were bridges as well, mediating between a largely male commercial book world and the new generation of women in publishing. The ways they defined their roles at Macmillan and Doubleday established professional standards for women in publishing, paving the way for expanded roles. They became mentors for the rapidly growing number of women editors who, throughout the 1920s, were added to the ranks of commercial editors. Yet, while they created a fresh professional path and mentored newcomers, Seaman and Masee maintained their own images as "the first of their kind" in publishing. By cultivating images of themselves as "pioneers," they contributed to an order of privilege.

The creation of children's departments was attributable, first, to the general prosperity of publishing during the decade, exemplified by Macmillan's relocation to a new, eight-story building on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street in 1923. With branch offices in many major cities, the firm boasted assets of around ten million dollars by 1927. Prosperity was also evidenced by the emergence of new firms with small but impressive backlists and by cooperative working relationships among publishers. Knopf, for example, organized the Book Table, a lunch club designed to mix publishers, booksellers, librarians, authors, and designers. But publishers' generosity also extended to their employees, generally by the implementation of "welfare work," the industry's version of welfare capitalism. Improved working conditions, including a five-day workweek, were initiated in many houses by the middle of the decade.⁵³

In addition to general prosperity, however, the proliferation of children's departments also stemmed directly from the successes of Seaman and Masee. While Seaman never saw a balance sheet, she knew that in some years the gross revenue from children's department exceeded a million dollars.⁵⁴ By the end of the decade, the number of Macmillan's children's titles

had grown from the two hundred and fifty at Seaman's disposal in 1919 to over six hundred, necessitating an eighty-page annual catalog, nearly three times the size of the original. Moreover, increased prestige for children's authors meant a corresponding increase in the number of manuscripts submitted to Seaman. To handle the workload, she enlarged the children's staff to include Gertrude Blumenthal and Eunice Blake, a student from her New Haven days. Staff members read fifty manuscripts a week, devoting themselves to their work, Seaman said, "beyond any hours or salary or common sense."⁵⁵

The other publishing houses that followed the example of Macmillan and Doubleday by creating children's departments also placed women in charge of them. Helen Dean Fish, who began her book career as a manuscript reader for Stokes in 1917, became the first children's editor at that firm in 1922. Marian Fiery was put in charge of E. P. Dutton's department in 1925; in the same year, Bertha Gunterman joined Longmans, Green. In 1926, Virginia Kirkus was appointed to head Harper's children's department, followed by Lucile Gulliver at Little, Brown in Boston in 1927 and Katharine Ulrich at Coward-McCann in 1928. As these women editors assumed their new roles, they looked to "pioneers" for guidance. In the *Horn Book*, Mahony quoted one anonymous editor who gratefully acknowledged Seaman's "pioneer work" as of "infinite help" and who doubted that she could have successfully navigated the process of creating her department without it.⁵⁶ Many of these newcomers published some of the most dearly loved (and best-selling) titles of the interwar years, and the *Nation* was liberal with praise for them. Departments like those at Macmillan and Doubleday represented the "aristocrats of the children's book world" and could be "trusted" to cultivate a reading taste for children and uphold traditional standards.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding the fact that children's editors in general sometimes received praise, Seaman and Masee continued receiving acclaim as "pioneers" and "aristocrats" of children's editing. In a 1928 *Horn Book* article, Mahony did mention the newer children's departments, but expressed her hope that all children's departments would eventually live up to Macmillan and Doubleday in both quantity and quality of children's books.⁵⁸ While other editors had talent, she declared, "the truth of the matter is that [Seaman and Masee] have made a new world of children's book publishing. They have set up such standards as will keep publishers running hard for a long time to equal them."⁵⁹ The explicit class discourse of aristocratic taste, in which bookwomen unhesitatingly participated, was more uneasily

situated against the discourse of the “reading democracy” than bookwomen seem to have comprehended.

Bookwomen not only mentored new editors but also nurtured new authors. Elizabeth Coatsworth and Rachel Field, two Macmillan authors, were particularly close to Seaman, and her relationships with these women exemplified her editorial attributes. Her friendship with Coatsworth was the older of the two, dating back to their college days at Vassar. When Seaman assumed her position in the children’s department, her usual long talks with Coatsworth turned toward considering books “from a new angle.” Coatsworth offered “inspiring advice and suggestions” to Seaman about titles on the list, including discussions of “an Oriental point of view” particularly interesting to both women.⁶⁰ These discussions prompted Coatsworth to try her own hand at writing for children, and in 1929 she produced a book about a cat and the Buddha in what became her most famous work, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*. Edited by Seaman, it required reprinting within one month and received the Newbery Medal in 1931. Seaman nurtured the writing development of Coatsworth from “impressionistic, occasionally precious or studious” to her position as a major contributor to American children’s literature.⁶¹ Eventually, Macmillan published over fifty Coatsworth titles; those books were commonly used by various storytellers like John Cronan at Boston Public Library.⁶² Much later, when Seaman’s speeches and essays were collected for publication, she dedicated the book to Coatsworth, for “the special friendship that has brightened every year since college.”

In Seaman’s professional relationship to Rachel Lyman Field, however, her “guiding hand”—and indeed that of all bookwomen—in promoting children’s books can most clearly be seen. Field was one of Seaman’s first authors and she possessed, it seemed to Seaman, a greater sense of publishing than the children’s editor herself. Field was born to a prominent New York family in 1894 but grew up in Massachusetts, entering Radcliffe in 1914 on the basis of her writing skill. While there, she wrote plays, some successfully produced between 1917 and 1920. After graduation, she worked for five years in the editorial department of the Players-Lasky silent film company in New York before becoming a freelance writer. She submitted her work to several publishers and received several rejections but, in 1924, Yale University Press published *The Pointed People: Verses and Silhouettes*, a volume of poetry for children. Unfortunately, the book was overshadowed by the publication of A. A. Milne’s *When We Were Very Young*, stalling her authorial debut even though children wrote to her that they enjoyed it.

Seaman had met Field shortly after becoming Macmillan's editor and was immediately impressed with her abundant ideas for stories or poems and her consistently accurate self-evaluations about which of those stories she had the ability to write. On rare occasions, when Field strayed from her literary "range," Seaman gently encouraged her to return to areas best suited to her.⁶³ When the author was at a loss about some aspect of her work, she came to Seaman's office for advice, although she recalled that the author generally worked through problems herself simply by describing them. Normally, in fact, she edited Field's work only for mechanics. In the latter half of the decade, Seaman accepted two books from Field: *Eliza and the Elves* (1926) and *Little Dog Toby* (1928). During the same period, Field also found May Masee a powerful ally, both as a friend and as the editor at Doubleday. Masee, in fact, also published some of Field's first books, including *An Alphabet for Boys and Girls* (1926), *Taxis and Toadstools: Verses and Decorations* (1926), *A Little Book of Days* (1927), and *Polly Patchwork* (1928). But shortly thereafter, Field embarked on writing the book upon which much of her reputation is based.

Although Seaman preferred to designate the illustrator for most of the books she published, Field was allowed to find her own illustrators. As a result, Field brought Dorothy Lathrop to her editor's attention. Inspired by a doll they saw in the window of an antique shop on Eighth Street in New York, author and illustrator decided to collaborate on a book. When the two women brought to Seaman their idea of writing a book about the doll and its hundred years of journeys, she responded only, perhaps thinking of Nicholas, that the idea was "interesting."⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the two women began work on *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*. Field predicted that the book would win the Newbery and, in 1930, she indeed became the first woman to receive the prestigious award.⁶⁵

The book is the autobiography of a wooden doll named Mehitable, shortened to Hitty, carved by a New Englander sometime around 1820. As she changed owners, the doll experienced a variety of adventures. Owned by missionaries, farmers, slave owners, and sea-faring families, Hitty (and the book she "writes") made her way through the nineteenth century, frequently pausing to appreciate America through comparison to other cultures. The storyline, privileging Yankee tradition, no doubt explains bookwomen's intense and prolonged attraction to the book, an attraction that ultimately contributed significantly to its success.

With a price of \$2.50, the book made its debut in October 1929 with Hitty as "the debutante of the year." Moore announced the book's publication on

November 3, 1929, in the “Three Owls” page of the *Herald Tribune*, uncharacteristically devoting the entire column to a discussion of the book. In so doing, she signaled not only approval for the book but also her feeling that Hitty “must be given her own distinctive place among books embodying the American tradition.”⁶⁶ She not only reviewed the book favorably, but also invited Field and the doll to the children’s room as guests at Children’s Book Week.⁶⁷ *Time* thereafter described Field as “the Louisa May Alcott of Contemporary Writers,” insisting that the book was the “only true juvenile classic written in America in a generation.”⁶⁸

Field, who regarded Seaman as pivotal to her writing career, frequently wrote to her editor. Her letters (and those of Field’s mother, also a correspondent) consistently revealed a firm conviction that Seaman was responsible for launching her career. Blurring the usual distinction between personal and professional influence, she told Seaman that she was “a grand *person* as well as a publisher.”⁶⁹ Allowing the author and illustrator to decide “every detail,” Seaman later said that she had “little to do” and that the book was only “just slightly” to her credit because she stood in Brett’s “good graces.”⁷⁰

In reality, Seaman was much more connected to the book’s enormous success than she admitted. Indeed, she kept *Hitty* before the book-buying public for three years by devoting the cover of her annual catalogs for the years 1929, 1930, and 1931 to the doll. The 1929 catalog displayed a color illustration from the book as the frontispiece. Although the theme of the catalog was doll stories, Seaman carefully reminded readers that *Hitty* was a pioneer, the “first story of an American doll done with authentic American backgrounds.” The next year, Seaman again made *Hitty* the cover feature in celebration of the book being awarded the Newbery. This time, Seaman portrayed Hitty in an airplane which, she explained, was how the doll (and Field) traveled to Los Angeles to receive the award. As one *Horn Book* contributor noted, the doll had become a “Public Person.”⁷¹

Hitty shared the 1931 catalog with Field’s next book, *Calico Bush*, another Newbery winner. But Seaman continued to endorse *Hitty*, featuring in the catalog a letter written by the doll to Anne Carroll Moore at the *Tribune*. In the letter, Hitty related her latest adventure to Moore: she was now owned by the poets Stephen Vincent Benet and Rosemary Carr Benet, who read the book to their young daughter. *Hitty*, it seemed, was adored by the “best” literary people, another reason to purchase a copy.

Field’s success continued after *Hitty* and *Calico Bush*, in no small part the result of both Masee’s and Seaman’s efforts to turn her into a successful author. Just as Bertha Mahony “was” the Bookshop, Louise Seaman and

May Masee “were” the children’s departments at Macmillan and Doubleday. They mediated between new authors and the public by mingling an entrepreneurial attitude with maternal qualities. Seaman once disclosed the depth of these relationships: “I don’t think other book editors can understand the way a children’s book-maker feels about her list. Each title means so much more than just an editor’s OK on a manuscript. More frequently than on other lists, it means the actual conception of the book by the editor and the difficult pursuit of the right author and artist. . . . How often it means a happy friendship . . . and thereby a deep concern for their welfare.”⁷² In addition to three Newbery winners and four honor books between 1925 and 1931, Seaman also published the writing of two bookwomen: Elinor Whitney’s *Tyke-y: His Book and His Mark*, her first children’s book, and her *Tod of the Fens* (Newbery honor book, 1929) and Moore’s *The Three Owls* (1925), a book of literary criticism.⁷³ Two books by Moore’s old mentor, Caroline Hewins (*A Traveler’s Letters to Boys and Girls* and *A Mid-Century Child*), became Macmillan titles as a result of Moore’s intervention.⁷⁴ Seaman also published Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes’s *Popo and Fifina*, the first children’s book, excepting poetry, written and illustrated by African Americans and published by a major house; *Men at Work*, the first juvenile photo documentary, by Lewis Hine, and the first wordless book, *What Whiskers Did*, by Ruth Carroll. Considering “the here-and-now no less vital than the once-upon-a-time,” she published books for children about science, such as Wilfrid Bronson’s *Fingerfins and Paddlewings*; Edith Patch’s *Holiday* series, and “real-world” books such as Louise Lamprey’s *All the Ways of Building*.⁷⁵ At Doubleday, likewise, Masee experienced much success. Like Seaman, she was responsible for several award-winning books, including *Tales from Silver Lands* (1925) by Charles Finger, *Downright Dencey* (1928) by Caroline Snedeker, and *The Runaway Papoose* (1929) by Grace Moon.

Seaman and Masee also steered their houses into the field of picture books in response to widespread demand among librarians and literary critics. By the end of the 1920s, full-color picture books were available in unprecedented quantity because of new processes in color lithography and bigger edition runs. School textbooks also changed as a direct result of books produced by bookwomen in publishing houses; publishers produced attractive books for use in classrooms and utilized the talents of the new authors and artists discovered by children’s book publishers.⁷⁶

Mahony decided to honor Seaman’s efforts by dedicating the August 1928 issue of the *Horn Book* to the editor’s achievements. To her mind, they

were cause for community celebration, and she anticipated that other children's editors would agree. But her assumption that other editors shared her warm-hearted admiration for Seaman proved naïve. Having included, in addition to tributes, substantial excerpts from Macmillan's annual catalog, Mahony was shocked to discover that other editors, far from viewing the issue as a celebration of community achievement, regarded it as little more than unpaid advertising. The immediate context for this incident was competition for market share, heightened by the advent and growing popularity of other media and, more indirectly, a nationwide sensitivity to censorship issues.⁷⁷ Accusations of payment by Macmillan to the *Horn Book* stunned and deeply hurt Mahony, who felt that her personal integrity had been called into question. Eventually, she used the *Horn Book* to issue a formal response.

One of the most memorable blows which the *Horn Book Editor* has received . . . was when a prominent figure in the library world turned to her one day and asked "What did the Macmillan Company pay you for the *Horn Book* of August 1928?" . . . We had said, "Let us . . . present the work of those Juvenile Editors who have been making such fine history and let us begin with Miss Seaman because she is the first." We had expected to follow with similar numbers for May Masee, Bertha Gunterman, Lucile Gulliver, and others. . . . So we asked Mr. Brett if he would write an article about the department. . . . If we were making a similar number of the magazine today, we should do it differently, having learned something as Editors. But we did think that we had made the aims and purposes of the magazine so clear that such a question would never occur to any one. . . . We . . . say once more that in the *Horn Book* we are attempting to build a genuinely critical, constructively appreciative and inventively active journal on books and reading. . . . The *Horn Book* is made without any consideration of its advertisers.⁷⁸

Mahony was so shaken by this assault on her editorial judgment that she did not print another tribute to an editor for eight years. It was only the first of several episodes questioning the *Horn Book's* editorial policy and the privilege its editors consistently extended to certain individuals.

In addition to the tribute debacle, Seaman was at the forefront of book-women's attention for another reason. In 1929, the thirty-five-year-old editor married Edwin de Turck Bechtel, a graduate of Harvard law school and an attorney for American Express. Her marriage to Bechtel placed Seaman

in a social world that included such individuals as Franklin Roosevelt, Bechtel's old classmate and coworker. Bechtel shared Seaman's love of literature, and the couple also enjoyed horseback riding, print collecting, and rose gardening—for which they became particularly well known—at their thirty-acre farm in Bedford Four Corners, New York. Bookwomen, although pleased by Seaman's happiness, wondered about the implications of marriage for the new Mrs. Bechtel, and for bookwomen. Cornelia Meigs, a Macmillan author, informed Seaman that everyone was involved in “the great question” of whether she would give up her career.⁷⁹

For reasons already noted, Meigs and other bookwomen had good reason to wonder. Potent national ambivalence about married working women, stemming from the much-discussed sexual revolution and the absence of an organized feminist movement, fueled the context for the continued marriage-versus-career debate. The relationship between the sexual revolution and female career aspirations was complex, as were the relationships among women themselves, who frequently disagreed about the appropriateness of women's professional aspirations.⁸⁰ Reformers, for example, did not automatically defend a woman's right to a position in the workplace if she wanted one. To some, the declining birth rate among white, middle-class Americans symbolized the disintegration of family, including notions of “race suicide.”⁸¹ But at thirty-five, although childbearing was certainly still a possibility for Seaman, delaying marriage might have diminished social pressure to do so. In the end, Louise Bechtel continued her professional life; it appears that Edwin Bechtel made no request that his new wife leave her career.

Shortly after their marriage, however, national economic events took a turn for the worse. Throughout the first half of 1929, sales and optimism in the publishing industry remained high and Brett predicted a continuation of prosperity.⁸² But the economy's long, downward spiral commencing in the fall of that year posed distinct hazards to bookwomen and the fragile “empire” of children's books they had helped to construct. Institutional mechanisms for the production of children's books were well defined and fully operational, and bookwomen had helped to launch the careers of some important literary figures as well as forums for professional exchange, including the *Horn Book*. The Great Depression, however, quickly fashioned a set of national priorities that was not necessarily favorable to children or their books. As prosperity receded, elegant children's books became superfluous, a painful, if not obnoxious, reminder of better days.