

The Inside Story of the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room

The invitation to this event calls my participation a "lecture", but since everyone these days wants "the inside story", I will call my lecture THE INSIDE STORY OF THE ELIZABETH NESBITT ROOM.

One tidbit is that we have a collection of songs by Pittsburgh's much-loved Bob Schmertz, who wrote not only "Monongahela Sal" but some songs for children. He wrote at least one song *not* suitable for anyone under the age of sixteen - when you can get a driver's license in Pennsylvania. It is called "Parking Space" and it begins:

You didn't do right the other night-

You drove right through a big red light-

You crumpled a fender, cursed and swore-

And old Saint Peter's up there keeping score.

Sinner, you won't find parking space,

parking space, parking space

Sinner, you won't find parking space

in the great white city of the Lord.

Welcome to Oakland. But this event was not my idea. Elizabeth Mahoney persuaded me that it would benefit the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room, and she gives the orders in the library of our school, so I must do as I am told. Blanche Woolls also must be held accountable, because of the Margaret Hodges Scholarship, a project that embarrasses me. Usually they wait until you are dead and perhaps know nothing about it, or may have something else on your mind, and in any case are not eyeball to eyeball with friends who are saying untrue things about you. But the scholarship benefits students who want to become children's librarians, so that is a good idea, an admirable idea, no matter what it is named.

Of course names should mean something. I remember a party given for the winners of some university scholarships, one of which was the John G. Bowman award named for the Chancellor responsible for the building of the Cathedral of Learning. Ruth Crawford Mitchell asked the students if they knew who John G. Bowman was. Only three out of about twenty raised their hands. "Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away; they fly

forgotten as a dream flies at the opening day."

Time bears all its daughters away too, and there may be many here today who never knew Elizabeth Nesbitt, but I hope that her name will always be remembered especially through the room named in her honor. In *Memoirs of Hadrian* Marguerite Yourcenar makes the emperor say, "libraries are like public granaries, amassing reserves against a spiritual winter which by certain signs, in spite of myself, I see ahead."

Lest we forget, Elizabeth Nesbitt was born in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, on the Susquehanna River. She kept to her family's Presbyterian faith, but her brother, Robert, has said that she was much influenced by the Germantown Friends School where students were required to attend the weekly Quaker meeting. The family moved to Pittsburgh in 1919, just after she had graduated from Goucher College. She received her certificate as children's librarian from Carnegie Library School in 1922 and in the years that followed rose to be supervisor of storytelling for all the branches of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, then teacher in the school, and in due course associate dean. She was so highly regarded that when the school moved to the University of Pittsburgh, Dean Harold Lancour asked her to come with it, even though she had retired. He knew that "Miss Nesbitt" was the one person whose presence and influence would make the new status of the school acceptable to both alumni and students. She was friendly, approachable, even-tempered and cheerful. To a few friends she was "Betty". But to most of us who knew her, she was "Miss Nesbitt", a name spoken with admiration, love, even with veneration, bearing witness that her teaching, writing, and above all, her example, had the power to change lives, though Elizabeth Nesbitt was so reticent about her inmost thoughts and feelings, that few could claim to know her intimately. She was a very private person, and so modest that her own family seldom heard of the honors that came to her until after the event.

She addressed audiences at major meetings both in the United States and abroad. Many of these speeches were later published, but she is best known as co-author of *A Critical History of Children's Literature*, first published by Macmillan in 1953, a landmark which has been recognized as a classic in its field. She was a prophet. Writing in a 1940 essay, she saw the present "machine age" as one that brought material well-being, but a decrease in idealism, an increase in leisure time but no increase in the ability to use leisure, more artificial recreation but less ability to entertain ourselves, more emphasis on education of the individual to think for himself or herself, but increased dependence on predigested thought, demand for more, and better books for children but "apparent lessening of faith in the child's ability to appreciate these books." The two great democratic institutions, the public school and the public library, should give more than acquisition of facts, she said. Facts should lead to thought and to comprehension of the best traditions of the past, the meaning of the present, the ideal of the future. The public library, offering voluntary education for a lifetime, should feed the child's hunger to find meaning in life.

Her storytelling was enhanced by her ability to immerse herself in the telling, and so to carry her audience with her. Her appearance and her voice were not overly dramatic, but compelling, allowing the depth and clarity of her intellect and her intense sincerity to show through. Her face became even more attractive as age brought out character. The total effect

added to her power to convince her audience of ultimate truths through storytelling. She served as a member of the American Library Association Executive Board and represented the United States at an International Federation of Librarians in Sweden in 1960. In 1968, she spoke at a symposium in Frankfurt, West Germany, on the training of children's librarians in our country. She was listed as one of Pittsburgh's "Ten Women of Talent", was named Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania, was given the Clarence Day Award for serving librarianship with distinction at home and abroad - these among many others. In 1976, the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room was named in her honor. Lest we forget.

How important is the building and maintaining of a historical collection of children's books like those in the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room? This past December, the Pierpont Morgan Library - with its preeminent collection, opened a two-month exhibit called *Be Merry and Wise: The Early Development of English Children's Books*. We could mount a similar exhibit in the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room. Talking to me in her home at Brigantine, New Jersey in 1973, Miss Nesbitt remembered a visit made to Pittsburgh by the noted bibliographer, d'Alte Welch of the American Antiquarian Society. He said, "I wonder if people here know what treasures they have in this collection." In it we can trace the years from 1700 to the mid-19th century, a period when the conviction that children's books must be in some way educational and didactic, gradually gave way to the notion that a child's book need do nothing more than amuse and delight. It was a period that began with the Puritan movement when children's books assured them that (and I quote) "they were not too little to go to hell" and ended with Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense*, Andersen's fairy tales and Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring*, all of them still in print and widely read today. It was a period that prepared the way for Lewis Carroll, Beatrix Potter, and Dr. Seuss.

Now just suppose that all the children's books in the English speaking world crumbled away or otherwise disappeared, except for the books published this year. We judge quality largely by comparison with the past - the past, warts and all. And without historic collections of children's books like ours, social insights of great value would be lost. It has been said that the history of the English-speaking people could be reconstructed from what those people have written for children.

It was not until the Carnegie Library School became the School of Library and Information Science in the University of Pittsburgh that Dean Lancour gave the collection a special room where it could grow. Furnishing the room was another matter. I thought we should try to create a non-institutional atmosphere, with a flavor of the past, but buying antiques was out of the question. Someone told me that the university had a warehouse on Atwood Street, so, with permission, I went there to rummage. (Later they made a rule against rummaging, so I was lucky.) Most of the furniture in the warehouse was more or less in need of repair, but the university carpenters put my haul into apple pie order: let me show you some of it along with a few of the gifts from friends who are here today: I am indebted to Perry Recker, who takes care of the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room, for checking and adding to my information, and to Dean Argall, head of our school's Media Department, for making the slides:

1) This souvenir plate, showing our Pittsburgh landmark, is labeled Carnegie Library and Technical School, Pittsburg, PA. Note that the "h" in Pittsburgh is missing. Carnegie's

flawless reference sleuths tell me that these clues date the plate between 1895 and 1911.

2) This lion's head is a piece from the roof of Carnegie Library. When the old roof was replaced, I was a student at Carnegie Library School. A crew of workmen tore off the copper edging and threw it down to the ground to be carted away. Miss Sarah Vann, who taught cataloging in the library school, had gotten a hold of a lion's head and put it on the wall between the windows of our study hall. I admired it, in fact, coveted it. She told me that she had gotten it from a man named Mr. Brown, known as Brownie, who was stationed in the attic of the library. With permission, I went up into that dark cavern and called "Brownie? Brownie!" Out of the gloom Brownie appeared and I made my request. "I can do it," he said, "but it will cost you. How many do you want?" I asked how much it would cost. "I'll have to charge you a dollar a piece," he said. I took three lion's heads - two for friends, and one now in the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room.

3) This chair came from the home of Miss Anna Moody Browne on the land where the Cathedral of Learning now stands. Miss Browne gave the university furniture from her parents' parlor and library and it was in the office of Agnes Lynch Starrett for many years, while Mrs. Starrett was director of the University Press. The original leather covering was in ribbons when I found it in the warehouse. The new covering, alas, vinyl, but it wears. The color is unchanged.

4) Detail of Browne chair

5) These two chairs, arranged for visitors, were once in the French Room, but had been replaced. Albrecht Duer's "Saint Jerome and the Lion" is on the wall to the right. St. Jerome is the patron saint of librarians.

6) We call this the Dante chair for good reason. It was once in the Italian Room. Somewhat broken, but now beautifully mended by the university carpenters, this is a sample of a seat for a master in a medieval school. Picture the young boys seated on stools or benches around their teacher. There was, of course, no school library.

7) This is the only known example of a school library supplied by Harper the publisher in the mid-19th century. The case came free of charge if you bought the books.

8) Here you see the Harper bookcase open with a few of the books, which we have acquired by good luck and considerable foraging. The list of titles available is still glued inside the door.

9) A hundred years later there were still almost no school libraries. Except for textbooks, spellers and readers, a bookcase of this size held all the books at the Herron Hill School. The building was being torn down, but the Board of Education said we could have the bookcase if I could get it out before the bulldozers reached it. They were at work even as I arrived at the school with the university truck close behind me.

10) This 19th-century student's desk was a gift from Miss Virginia Chase, who was head of

the Boys and Girls Department at Carnegie Library when I worked there. She was a devoted friend of Elizabeth Nesbitt. The desk was an heirloom from her own family. She also gave us an extensive collection of signed first editions, all gleaned from her rich contacts with authors and artists.

11) Another view of Virginia Chase's desk.

12) This cap and gown came to us from the estate of Dr. Katharine Briggs, British folklorist of international reputation. She lectured several times in Pittsburgh and became our friend. I remember that once when she was asked by a British interviewer whether she believed in fairies, she said, "With regard to fairies, I am an agnostic." She received the doctoral degree from Oxford University. Tom Pears personally supervised the work of inscribing the citation on the glass case.

13) In 1870, Edward Lear's *Nonsense Songs, Stories and Botany* appeared, with pictures illustrating important scientific information for the young. Some generous students of mine gave me a centennial set of plates taken from *Nonsense Botany*: Enkoopia Chikabiddia, Piggiwiggia Pyramidalis, Shoebootia Utilis, Manypeeplia Upsidownia, Phattphacia Stupenda, and Tigerlillia Terribilis. In the same case lives Hans Christian Andersen, with his tall hat, rolled umbrella and carpet bag. We have every edition of Andersen's work that we can lay hands on, including a unique volume of the intricate, fantastic cutout designs he made for children.

14) This is a dressed doll from the family of Dr. Margaret McFarland, who gave it to the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room. She was for many years the close friend and advisor of Fred Rogers in his thinking and planning of the world-famous programs that have made him one of the most admired Americans. Fred Rogers has won more than 150 awards since 1956, the first coming from the Pittsburgh Presbytery, one from the Pennsylvania Library Association for the best book of 1985 for young people by a Pennsylvania author, an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from Yale University, and most recently, a national survey of preschool opinion in which Mr. Rogers won hands down as the man who should be our next President. (Janet Jackson and Arnold Schwarzenegger came in as weak runners-up.) Fred Rogers is an adjunct professor (which means unpaid) in the School of Library and Information Science and has given us his archives, including a duplicate set of the famous puppets. These are now on long-term loan to the Children's Museum, but they belong to the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room.

The other two dolls in this case are also from Dr. McFarland and are identical with those you see on the cover of *Two Dutch Dolls* by Florence K. Upton.

15) This beautiful cabinet is something of a mystery. Its provenance was recorded in an inventory book of many years ago, now lost, but it is thought to have come from the Edgeworth home of Ethelbert Nevin, who wrote the music not only for *The Rosary* but also for Eugene Field's *Little Boy Blue* and *Wynken, Blynken and Nod*. Some of Fred Rogers' work is displayed here.

16) Again, the Fred Rogers display.

17) Among the numerous pieces of original art work contributed by Virginia Chase is a woodcut by Lynd Ward from *Johnny Tremain*, a novel about the Revolutionary War, from which Miss Nesbitt loved to quote the words of the patriot James Otis: "We give all we have, lives, property, safety, skills...we fight, we die for a simple thing. Only that a man can stand up." *Johnny Tremain* won the Newberry Award in 1944.

18) This watercolor is from Roger Duvoisin's *Petunia*, the story of a silly goose.

19) The Elizabeth Nesbitt Room makes a point of collecting the work of Pennsylvania authors and artists. Jeannette Campbell Shirk was a graduate of Carnegie Library School, earned the master's degree in fine arts at the University of Pittsburgh and was its Fine Arts librarian from 1950 to 1963. She gave us her collection of books, notable for their fine illustrations. She was the author of a thesis, *Picture Windows: Children's Book Illustrations*, and was herself an artist who won many awards. Her panther was modeled after a statue on the Panther Hollow bridge.

20) This special printing for a new edition of *Winnie the Pooh* was signed by A.A. Milne and Ernest Shepard. It is from Virginia Chase's collection.

21) A letter on the back of this sketch, dated Sept. 29, 1938, is from James Thurber's brother Robert, addressed to Fletcher Hodges, Jr., former Curator of the Foster Hall Collection: "Please accept the enclosed pencil sketch with my compliments...my brother did it in an idle moment at home a couple of years ago." James Thurber's *Many Moons* won the Caldecott Award in 1944.

22) Now we turn to some of the books themselves. *The History of the Horn-Book* is a landmark work in two volumes published in London in 1896. A limited number of copies had a concealed pocket at the back holding facsimiles of hornbooks and a battledore, the tiny so-called "books" that were a child's bane or blessing for centuries as they learned their ABC's and the Lord's Prayer.

23) This copy of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* is a third edition. Four editions appeared within four months of the first publication, 1719. *Robinson Crusoe* was not written for children, but as we know, they have made it their own. Hundreds of editions for children have appeared since 1719.

24) This six-volume set, *The Circle of the Sciences*, was published in London, 1769, by John Newbery, a London bookseller whose shop, the Bible and Sun, was in St. Paul's Churchyard. Because he had the revolutionary idea of publishing and selling books for the amusement of children, our modern-day Newbery Award bears his name. *The Circle of the Sciences* comprises grammar, arithmetic, rhetoric, poetry, logic and geography, all made "familiar and easy to young gentlemen and ladies." An expert Pittsburgh bookbinder reproduced the original bindings for us...at great expense, I may add.

25) These little chapbooks, "chap" meaning cheap, were sold for sixpence from the late 1600's to the late 1800's. The stories of Robin Hood, Dick Whittington, Jack the Giant Killer, Tom Thumb, Bluebeard and countless other titles are now rarities and sell for unbelievably high prices. Harvard has one of the biggest collections - over 2,000 titles. Our collection is respectable, almost all of them inherited with the original collection from Carnegie Library School. We protect them in special cases and acid-free envelopes.

26) Another view of chapbooks.

27) How much we owe to Charles Perrault! Here is *The Histories of Passed Times: or The Tales of Mother Goose*. Only a few stories, but he gave us *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Bluebeard* and *Puss-in-Boots*. Here you see Mother Goose, *Ma Mere l'Oye*, telling the tales. Monsieur Perrault was a scholar, a member of the Academie Francaise and assistant superintendent of public works under Louis XIV, but all of that is forgotten. He is remembered for *The Tales of Mother Goose*.

28) *The Story of Mankind* was the first book to win the Newbery Award for the best book written for children in a given year. Hendrik Van Loon won it in 1922 and signed this copy for Frances Clarke, who had recently graduated from Carnegie Library School. Later, Frances Clarke Sayers became an eminent storyteller, writer and critic - and was a beautiful woman, as you can see from the inscription, referring to *Beauty and the Beast* and showing a bleeding heart, presumably Mr. Van Loon's.

29) Shortly after the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room opened, Clifton Fadiman saw a notice about it and wrote to offer us his collection of children's books, the ones he had used in writing his definitive article on children's literature for the *Encyclopedia Britanica* and an anthology that he was planning. Each of his books had handwritten notes at the back, and they are a unique archive of one of America's most highly regarded 20th century critics. When Clifton Fadiman's letter came, I consulted Mr. William Rea, who was then chairman of the Board of Trustees at the University, because something told me that in accepting this gift, expense might be involved - even in transporting 2,000 books from Santa Barbara to Pittsburgh. Mr. Rea's answer was, "Fly out and get them." We got them. I wish I could tell you the stories behind each of the fine collections that have come to the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room, some of them from friends who are here today, but the Clifton Fadiman Collection will stand as an example, for want of time to tell more.

30) In 1906, Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* appeared for the first time, enchantingly illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Our copy is a first edition. We have a very respectable collection of Rackham illustrations.

31) Our last slide is to me perhaps the most interesting of all. Elizabeth Keith Botset, a friend and a graduate of Carnegie Library School, belonged to a family in which librarianship was a hereditary profession. The Keith family lived at 6421 Kentucky Avenue in Shadyside. The Keith children were avid readers and one of them, Kate, had fallen in love with Kipling's *Jungle Books*. The year was 1898 and Kipling was living at Rottingdean, on the south coast of England near Brighton. His eyes were very bad. Mrs. Botset has said, "He took great pains

to write this letter for a child." It must have been writing using a magnifying glass and a fine-pointed pen. Mrs. Botset's niece, named for the original Kate, gave us the letter, which measures not more than an inch and a half by two inches. It says:

Dear Miss Keith, I can't write a letter as tiny as yours to me
but this is the best I can do. I have only just come back from
South Africa where I have seen ostriches & monkeys and all
sorts of things. That is why I did not answer your letter before.
I will see if I can't write some stories that will amuse you some
day & I am glad you like what I have written about Mowgli.

Vy sincerely Yours

Rudyard Kipling

Three of the *Just So Stories* had already appeared in *St. Nicholas Magazine* by February, 1898. Kipling must have been planning the rest of them when he wrote to Kate Keith. Incidentally, we have all of *St. Nicholas* in the original bindings.

Allow me to add two footnotes for which I have no slides. Soon after the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room opened, Fletcher and I were in Oxford and went to the rare book department of Blackwell's. It was hidden in a back alley and up three flights of stairs. I browsed happily for an hour or so and asked, "Do you have anything put away on special shelves?" The attendant disappeared and came back with a little book box bound in lined and red leather. It contained Beatrix Potter's privately printed 1902 *Tailor of Gloucester*, which has text and pictures different from the book that you and I know. The price was 450 pounds. My reason tottered. But that night I asked the opinion of a friend, Walter Oakeshott, who had been Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University and lived every day among rare books. "Buy it," he said at once. "Every collection needs a few stars in its crown." I invite you to come see *The Tailor of Gloucester*.

With all these little treasures, when I come into the Elizabeth Nesbitt Room, my heart lifts as I read the plaque at the door: A GOODLY HERITAGE. "The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." On the far wall is another plaque, from Walter de la Mare's poem, *Farewell*, which Miss Nesbitt loved - "...all things thou wouldst praise Beauty took from those who loved them in other days."

If you are shocked at what *The Tailor of Gloucester* cost, my final footnote is my final inside story. In 1946, just after the end of World War II, Luther Evans, the Librarian of Congress, read about a manuscript that would come up for auction at the Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York in April. It was a hand-written little book that Lewis Carroll had made to please a child.

He had illustrated it himself for the original Alice and called it *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*. As an old lady she had put it up at auction in 1928 at Sotheby's and the famous bookseller, A.S.W. Rosenbach, had bought it for \$72,500. He had sold it to an American whose widow was now having it sold again. (The British Museum had offered up to 10,000 pounds for the manuscript at the Sotheby auction.) Luther Evans hoped that a group of Americans could buy it and present it to the British Museum as a token of the affection and admiration of our country for the British people. The money was easily raised - \$50,000. In a moving ceremony the Archbishop of Canterbury accepted the gift - an "unsullied" gift he called it - on behalf of the Museum. The British who were present, according to Luther Evans, "recorded the sentiment by choking up and sniffing in a thoroughly non-British way and the London Press joined in the expression of national gratitude." Alice had come home. Humpty Dumpty should have the last word:

[Read from *Alice in Wonderland*]

"Impenetrability - That's what I say!" "Would you tell me, please," said Alice, "what that means?" "Now you talk like a reasonable child," said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. "I meant by impenetrability, that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life."

Dr. Henderson, what do you mean to do next?