

The Books They Read as Children

George Matheson looks at the role that books played in shaping the early lives of his ancestors

All Photos Courtesy of Author's Collection



Bessie at age 9.

Both Bessie and Kathleen were children of an era often referred to as “the first golden age of children’s literature”. Extending from the 1860s into the 1920s, these were the decades during which childhood came to be regarded as distinct from adulthood, the women’s movement was getting underway, and advances in printing were making books more accessible and affordable. Books written for a younger audience and targeting specific age groups were catching on. By the 1880s, booksellers were promoting them as gifts for birthdays and other occasions – especially Christmas.

Most of the books with Bessie’s name in them had been gifts from her mother Addie who, born in 1860, had been a child at the very start of this “golden age”.

The well-worn/loved book that first caught my attention has a colorful picture on its heavy cardboard cover. Inside (in Addie’s handwriting) is written: “Bessie Ratcliff - A Present from Santa Claus - Christmas 1894”. Entitled *Home Stories: Pretty Pictures and Stories to Interest Our Little Friends*, the beautifully illustrated pages feature

There’s an oak bookcase in the upstairs hallway of my home that’s filled with children’s books. Most being a century or more old, they give a nostalgic feel to the house and, as I’ve discovered, they played a role in forming the character, and shaping the lives, of the children who read them.

Many of these books were my grandmother Bessie’s. Born in 1885, she’d moved into this house as a young mother in 1917 bringing with her some treasured books from her childhood. Most of the others had belonged to her daughter (my mother) Kathleen; born in 1914, she grew up here.



Cover of *Home Stories* 1894.

brief verses, short stories, and snippets on topics like soap bubbles, pet lambs, famous people, ice-skating, and home-made toys. While entertaining, the book was clearly intended to impart to its young readers Victorian attitudes about children – to be polite, never naughty, understand the virtue of silence, and work resolutely for some great purpose in life knowing the importance of “guarding against the impurities of your own nature”.

Typical of children’s literature at that time it fitted nicely with the traditional, religious atmosphere of the home in which Bessie was raised.

Another of her books, one with a rather plain cover and no illustrations at all, carried on the religious theme. Bessie had received it in December 1898 as a 13th birthday present from her mother. The story had been constructed in 1896 by Charles Monroe Sheldon, an American Congregationalist minister, as something to be read aloud, chapter by chapter, at his Sunday evening church services. It

begins with the main character, a pastor, challenging his congregation to not do anything for a whole year without first asking: “What would Jesus do?”

Within weeks, Sheldon was preaching to a packed crowd and his story was quickly turned into a religious novel bearing the title *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (Interestingly, this instant bestseller has, to date, sold over 30,000,000 copies and remains in print). Bessie’s copy, dated 1897, was hot-off-the-press; she would start off her 14th year asking the question it posed and that question would ultimately set the course for her life.

For Christmas that same year, Addie gave her daughter another book – one that posed a very different question that would influence Bessie’s life choices. This gift was Part 2 of Louisa May Alcott’s famous classic *Little Women*. Now considered a “coming-of-age book”, Alcott had been commissioned to write it as a book for teenaged girls and, with themes of domesticity, work and true love, it instantly resonated with them. As Part 1, released in 1868, opens, it’s Christmastime and four girls, the eldest 16 and the youngest 13 (coincidentally the same ages as Bessie and her 3 sisters), have been told by their mother that there would be no gifts that year because, with their father away serving as chaplain in the American Civil War, the family should be saving their pennies and not thinking of indulging themselves. As the story progresses, the sisters share with each other their difficulties, pleasures and thoughts - and their dreams of what they will make of their lives. While Meg, Beth and Amy aspire to more traditional lives, the feisty protagonist ‘Jo’, still

popular with its young readership, is a rebellious tomboy who loves books, wants to be a writer and intends never to marry. As Part 2, released a year later, opens, the girls are young ladies. Meg marries and starts off her married life determined to be “a model housekeeper”. When finally Jo comes to accept the limitations and obligations of her gender and to derive satisfaction in her roles as a dutiful sister, loving daughter and devoted wife and mother, her parents are greatly relieved.

When *Little Women* was written (back in Addie’s day), traditional values pretty much had to win out; a woman’s role was virtually “carved in stone”.

But, by Bessie’s time, a woman’s role in society was becoming less clearly defined. As a Christmas gift in 1901, at age 16, she received a heavy tome of 822 pages that would guide her as she made decisions about what she would do with her life. *The Girl’s Own Annual, Volume XXI*, was a compilation of *The Girl’s Own Paper* (GOP) from October 7, 1899 to September



Cover of *The Girl's Own Annual* 1901.

29, 1900. *GOP* was a British weekly magazine catering to girls and young women that provided a vital outlet for women's writing about social issues as well as housekeeping tips and fashion news and had an important influence on girls of Bessie's generation. The articles in her Volume heralded in a new century, describing how things had changed for women during the late 19th century and giving advice to girls who, like her were becoming women at the dawn of the 20th century. In October 1899, an article by Lilly Watson, a regular contributor, voiced issues of women's rights and described how the role of women in society was changing. While acknowledging that these "new ideas" challenged traditional values, leading some readers to speak of God's disapproval, the writer went on to write: "I should be a traitor to my sex did I not rejoice in the increasing facilities for development, for a full, free and noble life offered to women." Many other articles looked into career opportunities opening up and several identified nursing as a challenging (and interesting) new option.

Coming as Bessie did, from a modest middle-class family, she would have been expected to either marry and raise a family or find work while continuing to reside at home. At age 20 Bessie, with no immediate marriage prospects and with encouragement from her mother to ignore father's misgivings and "decide for herself", she moved "to the big city", trained as a nurse and pursued a career as a private duty nurse. But, as her letters and diaries found in the attic tell us, it was while working (and living on her own) that she fell in love with a dashing (and equally



Kathleen at age 8.

smitten) Baptist minister and became "the preacher's wife". [*Nurse or Wife: An early 20th Century Choice, Your Genealogy Today*, May/June 2017, p.26-29]

Having first followed an independent path, she eventually chose a traditional woman's role and to the end of her life dutifully fulfilled her obligations at home and at church. [*Reflections on a Life, Your Genealogy Today*, May/June 2013, p.6-7.]

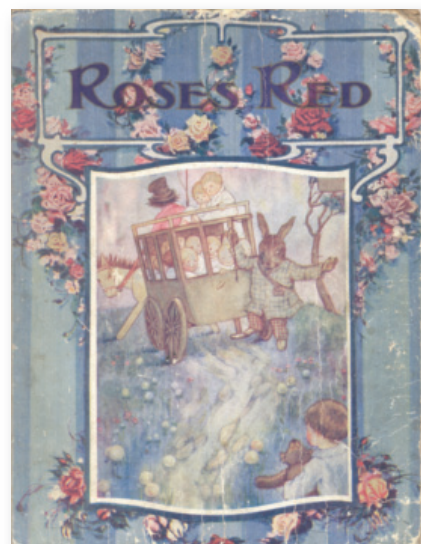
Alongside Bessie's treasured books from her childhood – the ones that had influenced her choices - now sit the books from her daughter Kathleen's childhood. Many of these Kathleen had received as prizes from her father's church and many others came as gifts from relatives and friends - including Santa Claus.

In sorting out the family attic some years ago, I came across the home-made Santa suit that my grandfather had worn on Christmas mornings. So, when I spotted a book on the shelves dated Christmas 1919 inside of which was written "to Kathleen from Santa Claus", I was drawn to it.

Roses Red, with its cheerful,

now sadly faded cover, is filled with whimsical tales and rhymes about fairies, little puppies and fluffy ducks along with several heartwarming family stories. In one of these, a little girl and her brother are trying to make it feel like Christmas even though their father is away on a ship somewhere and their mother has gone to care for a very sick aunt. On Christmas Day Daddy returns home, the postman delivers a message that mother is on her way and, as sadness gives way to joy, the little boy proclaims: "It is like Christmas now!"

As Kathleen grew older, the themes of the books she read became more serious – often conveying a rigidly religious message. *The Narrow Pathway To the Heavenly Home* was one of these. Kathleen had "won" it, at age 9, as a prize for perfect attendance at Sunday school. (Not winning it would have been difficult when one's father is the minister and one's mother sits every week in the same pew to listen attentively to his sermons). Dogmatic in style, the book's Preface starts off "My dear young friends, this book is



Rose's Red 1919.

specially written for the help of those of you who, having entered the 'straight gate,' and are learning to walk in the 'narrow way'."

This narrow pathway was to be a theme to the end of her life.

But other books of hers that I found on the shelves also shaped her life. Among these were "the great classics" which formed a foundation for her career as an English teacher and popular books of her time that presented girls in a new more "modern" light. But a book that somehow caught my interest was a dense, 573 page novel I'd never heard of.

Called *The Wide Wide World*, when first published in 1850, it had ranked in popularity alongside *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an early American bestseller. In *Little Women*, Alcott even described her feisty character 'Jo' as enjoying it as did, I suspect, my mother. I can imagine my mother, at age 11, identifying with the protagonist Ellen who was about her age when the book starts. Wrestling with

dilemmas over the next 7 years, this bright girl comes to find that her own stubborn strength can coexist with her faith in God. Holding tightly to her religious beliefs and the values she cherishes, she tries to never offend God so, when disapproving of people, she struggles (not always successfully) to hold her sharp tongue. Ellen becomes strongly attracted to and eventually marries a young man with whom she can carry on intelligent discussions. Confident and determined to live her life as she wished, Kathleen may well have followed Ellen's example as she walked the narrow pathway.

At the time she was deciding what to do with her life, Kathleen, while a proper Christian lady, was poised to grasp the opportunities opening up to young women in the 1930s.

She graduated from university, completed teacher's college, started a career as a high school English teacher and married well. According to a holdover from earlier times, her husband, a professional man, was required to send a formal letter to the school principal giving his wife permission to continue working after they were married. She took only a brief time off work when I was born.

My parents were a professional couple, perhaps a bit ahead of their time; they shared house-keeping chores and all major decisions. Always proud of her status and always frugal, Kathleen expected people to behave properly – exhibit good manners and morals, and dress modestly as appropriate for the occasion. As times changed, she would 'lighten up' a bit, temper somewhat her disapproval but never cease to view alcohol, tobacco, dancing, swear words and

misplaced commas as fundamentally wrong.

In preparing this article, I was fortunate to have an abundance of children's books from my mother's and grandmother's times to draw from. I chose just a few to include though it may be more correct to say that the books chose me.

Bessie, who died when I was 12, I recalled only vaguely as my elderly (always busy) grandmother. Her mother, Addie, died in 1924 – long before I was born. My mother, by the time she died at age 93, I was coming to know quite well.

Reading and researching these children's books (along with letters and diaries they left behind), provided me with a better sense of who they were and what had formed their characters and shaped their lives. What memories I had of them changed – sometimes softening, sometimes strengthening – and I gained greater appreciation and respect for my mother, my grandmother and my great-grandmother.

As we involve ourselves in researching our family histories, we are accustomed to look through photos, letters, public records and diaries. But we are inclined to overlook the children's books that sit decoratively on our shelves. I came close to ignoring them but now I rank them with these other material as a rich but too often unexplored source of information that can contribute to the larger picture we seek. ☞☞☞



Cover of *Wide Wide World* 1925.



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