

Florida State University Libraries

Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations

The Graduate School

2014

The Egg and Us: Contextualization and Historicization of Betty MacDonald's Works

Samantha Hoekstra



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE EGG AND US: CONTEXTUALIZATION AND HISTORICIZATION
OF BETTY MACDONALD'S WORKS

By

SAMANTHA HOEKSTRA

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of History
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Spring 2014

Samantha Hoekstra defended this thesis on December 9, 2013.

The members of the supervisory committee were:

Maxine Jones

Professor Directing Thesis

Maxine Montgomery

Committee Member

Edward Wynot

Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the thesis has been approved in accordance with University requirements.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| ABSTRACT..... | iv |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 1. HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE USE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY..... | 6 |
| 2. DOUBLE YOLK - CONTEXTUALIZING BETTY'S WEDDED BLISS | 14 |
| 3. WILDERNESS WIVES AND FRONTIER FOLLIES - HATCHING <i>THE EGG AND I</i> | 29 |
| 4. AN EGG-SHAPED WORLD - BETTY ABROAD..... | 42 |
| 5. THE GOLDEN EGG AND THE SILVER SCREEN | 57 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 65 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 68 |
| BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH | 73 |

ABSTRACT

As history continues to trend towards the incorporation of interdisciplinary sources, it becomes a fitting place to champion one of the “lost voices” of American culture. This thesis seeks to establish Betty MacDonald not only as a subject worthy of academic attention but also as a historically significant American. Her continued popularity over nearly seventy years and across international boundaries suggests a strong element of realism in American pragmatic humor that provides a connective thread between disparate eras and countries. Her ability to cross class lines and act as a bridge-figure between rural and urban America provides a more complete picture of the country at mid-century. Through the use of MacDonald’s four autobiographical works, the film version of her first book, audio interviews, the Betty Bard MacDonald papers from University of Washington’s special collections, WorldCat searches, census data analysis, friends’ memoirs, and foreign book jackets, this thesis attempts to reevaluate MacDonald’s accepted place in the domestic humor genre, and suggests that she deserves a wider scope of inquiry relevant to her place in American humor and American history.

INTRODUCTION

The year 1946 witnessed the meteoric success of Betty MacDonald, a resident of Washington State who had in the previous year published an autobiographical account of her first marriage entitled *The Egg and I*. The book went on to sell over a million copies within the first two years of publication and was serialized by *Atlantic Monthly*. *The Egg and I* generated a film starring Claudette Colbert and Fred McMurray, which was released in 1947, as well as a less popular television series. Over the following decade MacDonald published *The Plague and I* (1948), *Anybody Can Do Anything* (1950) and *Onions in the Stew* (1955). Although her books are listed as non-fiction, they are really a collection of semi-autobiographical essays, amassed from years of relating humorous stories to friends about her life experiences.¹ Since her death from ovarian cancer in 1958, MacDonald's popularity with American audiences has steadily declined, although her *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* series of children's books remain readily available. She has developed a cult following of fiercely devoted fans and is continually rediscovered by curious readers perusing used books stores.

Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner's *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor From Colonial Times to the 1980s* brought MacDonald to academic attention by including an excerpt from *The Egg and I*. But by 1988, when that book was published (thirty years after her death), her recognition had so diminished that her name is not included in the list of authors in the volume who "will be familiar to most readers."² Five years later she was included in the *Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, but in the *Harvard Review*, reviewer Stephen Love is puzzled by the biographical entry accorded MacDonald, whom he classifies as a "far lesser talent."³

Since the 1980s, MacDonald's works, primarily *The Egg and I*, have been the subject of limited scholarly inquiry, most of which have characterized MacDonald as one of the forerunners of the domestic humor book popularized by Shirley Jackson and Erma Bombeck. But though her works focus on her own life and are genuinely funny, their value extends beyond an entertaining

¹ Blanche Caffiere. *Much Laughter, a Few Tears: Memories of a Woman's Friendship with Betty MacDonald and Her Family* (Victoria BC: Trafford, 1992), 113.

² Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner, *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988) 271, 280, xix.

³ Stephen Love, "Review: *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, by Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin," *Harvard Review*, No. 8 (Spring, 1995), pp. 188-189.

read. The characterization of MacDonald as a domestic humorist has precluded her significance as the focus for historical study.

She offers a biting rebuttal to one of the back-to-nature movements that have arisen in escapist non-fiction with regular frequency in America since before Thoreau. The memoir of her hospitalization in one of the last tuberculosis sanatoriums depicts issues of race, class and gender in institutional America. Her surprisingly modern sense of humor brings urban, Depression era Seattle to life as a relatable experience. Her final book offers one of the best descriptions of the 1950s American teen, so much so that the play adapted from it remains popular in American high schools into the 21st century. Through the use of MacDonald's four autobiographical works, film, audio interviews, the Betty Bard MacDonald papers from University of Washington's special collections, WorldCat searches, census data analysis, friends' memoirs, and foreign book jackets, this thesis attempts to reevaluate MacDonald's accepted place in this genre and suggests that she deserves a wider scope of inquiry relevant to her place in American humor and American history.

Chapter 1 provides a brief discussion of the use of autobiography in the disciplines of History and American Studies and establishes how this thesis will approach MacDonald's autobiographical works. It argues, with the use of an American Studies' perspective on the topic, that autobiographies are unique but legitimate sources of historical inquiry which reflect and inform contemporary cultures. The second half of Chapter 1 provides the complete Betty MacDonald historiography, divided into two sections. The first discusses how historians of medicine have utilized and analyzed MacDonald's tuberculosis memoir, *The Plague and I*. This first section of historiography reveals that, for these historians, the value in this book lies in its ability to provide a window into life in the American interwar sanatorium. The final section of MacDonald's historiography focuses on feminist literary theorists' interpretations of her work. These scholars are analyzing *The Egg and I* not for what it says about marriage in rural America during the 1920s, but rather for what it reveals about postwar American ideology around gender. This thesis argues that these assessments have narrowed the scope of analysis and inquiry by labeling MacDonald as a domestic humorist.

By providing a detailed historical context of MacDonald's narrative of marriage, divorce and remarriage, Chapter 2 offers a reassessment of previous analyses of what her autobiographical works say about the American marriage. It widens the scope of analysis to

include all her works, her parents' and grandparents' marriages, as well as the complete narrative of MacDonald's own marriage, divorce, single-motherhood and remarriage. Using historical context through census data, Chapter 2 argues that, when used as a primary source, her autobiographical works complicates not only concepts about MacDonald's contribution postwar ideology, but also the picture of interwar marriage and divorce.

Chapter 3 examines what inspired *The Egg and I* and whether these inspirations affect the characterization of her works and her place in the canon of American humor. A letter from the University of Washington's Betty Bard MacDonald Papers collection reveals that one of the motivations for the subject matter of *The Egg and I* was the influx of back-to-nature books in the late 1930s and 1940s, written primarily by contented, often ecstatic, women living with their husbands in rural or wild America. MacDonald decided that for her first book she would offer "the other side of [the back-to-nature experience]. [She] would give the bad sport's account of life in the wilderness without lights, water or friends and with chickens, Indians and moonshine."⁴ A comparison between MacDonald and the authors of two of these books suggests that not only was she not consciously launching six decades of women's domestic humor, but that the real theme of her first work was the tension between rural and urban, rather than a critique of suburban housewifery.

The second section of Chapter 3 is a closer examination of what inspired MacDonald to begin a career as writer, something she had never considered before. MacDonald responded to a publisher agent's search for regional writers, specifically northwestern writers, which led to the conceptualization of her life on the chicken ranch as really life on one of America's last frontiers. The final section of chapter 3 builds on this premise and uses it to connect MacDonald's writings to genres in American humor outside domestic, woman only humor. It also provides a deeper analysis of race in MacDonald's writings, and suggests that the clearest inheritor of MacDonald's style is contemporary American humorist David Sedaris.

MacDonald's international popularity has, in several ways, outstripped her popularity in her native country. On what would have been MacDonald's 100th birthday in 2008, Pat and Jess Bondurant who owned the chicken ranch from *The Egg and I* for thirty two years received phone calls from Heidelberg, Germany, "inviting [them] to fly over and help celebrate the author's

⁴ Betty MacDonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, (New York: Lippincott, 1950, 1-257) 252.

birthday” in 2008.⁵ Chapter four examines how international audiences have responded to and characterized her works, focusing on former Czechoslovakia and Japan. By analyzing MacDonald’s publishing history in the Czech and Slovak languages, the place of American literature in Czech culture and the historical circumstances surrounding the publication of her works over the past seven decades, chapter four posits that gender, the tone of communist censorship and characterization of MacDonald’s works as chronicles of survival contributed to her immense popularity. The chapter concludes by focusing on the Japanese-American “Kimi” (Monica Sone) in *The Plague and I* and argues that the historical circumstances surrounding the tuberculosis outbreak in postwar Japan as well as MacDonald’s characterization of “Kimi” contributed to the initial and continuing popularity of the book in Japan. It also notes that MacDonald’s influence on Sone’s memoir *Nisei Daughter*, itself influential, has gone unrecognized.

The final chapter focuses on another source overlooked by scholars. Using feminist film theory, chapter five analyzes the differences between the film and book versions of *The Egg and I* and how these differences complicate the picture of postwar American mass culture. In particular, the simplification of MacDonald’s more nuanced book to a watered-down, “womanfied” version reveals a role that Hollywood had assumed in relation to American literature.

History has become a discipline that rescues lost voices and fleshes them out through the craft of historical inquiry. The fact that MacDonald’s works are, essentially, autobiographies has contributed to her ambivalent standing in. The intention behind autobiographical works forces historians to question the authenticity and therefore validity of the genre as a source of historical inquiry. Since MacDonald’s death in 1958, History has embraced the cultural turn in social sciences – an analysis of MacDonald’s autobiographical works suggests a methodology that historians can employ when interacting with this type of source.

The first sentence of Robert F. Sayre’s article “The Proper Study-Autobiographies in American Studies,” insists that “autobiographies, in all their bewildering number and variety, offer the student in American Studies a broader and more direct contact with American

⁵ Jennifer Jackson, “New Owners Take on Rural Life with Egg and I Farm,” *The Wenatchee World*, April 9, 2008. <http://www.wenatcheeworld.com/news/2008/apr/09/new-owners-take-on-rural-life-with-egg-and-i-farm/?print>

experience than any other kind of writing.”⁶ Betty MacDonald’s autobiographical works are a window into rural 1920s America, interwar institutional America, Depression era Seattle and the American family before, during and after World War II. Her unique narrative of marriage, divorce, single motherhood, and remarriage complicates the perception of postwar ideology surrounding the remarried woman.

⁶ Robert F. Sayre, “The Proper Study – Autobiography and American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1977), 241. Intention is one effective way to separate the genre of autobiography from letters, memoirs, diaries and other personal narratives. Historians have a disconcerting habit of consolidating these forms of writing, despite genres’ disparate objectives.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE USE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Robert Sayre describes autobiographies as the unacknowledged “bastards” of English and History departments, a characterization that creates a difficult position for the interdisciplinary student interested in autobiography as a potential source of study.⁷ Historians balk at the innate subjectivity of autobiography, while literary theorists consider the terrain barren of analytical merit. The lack of discourse in the historical discipline on the subject of autobiography is symptomatic of the profession’s prejudices against it as the focus of study. No one methodology or approach has been explicitly outlined. A discussion on the historian’s use of autobiography is likely to be found in small, qualifying introductory paragraphs or in footnotes. Autobiographical texts themselves are generally used by historians to add cautious context.

Historians hesitate at an exclusive focus on an autobiographical source. If the focus of historical inquiry is indeed an autobiography, the historian usually takes on the role of “debunker” – someone interested in the lies revealed by an autobiographical text. Historicizing autobiography results in the historian as fact-checker, an author-wrote-historian-researched dialogue between the text and the historian’s narrative. The question then is not whether historians can legitimately use autobiographies as a source for historical analysis, but rather what approach the historian should take when an autobiographical text is the focus of analysis. For the purpose of this thesis, autobiography is defined as a text in which the self-reflexive pronoun ‘I’ “operates as a textual referent for the biographical, historical person who writes or utters it,” specifically for the purpose of public consumption.⁸

This chapter will provide a brief review of the American Studies perspective on the use of autobiography in historical study. It establishes the genre as a useful source for cultural analysis, particularly if the focus is American culture. MacDonald’s historiography follows this discussion and is divided into two parts. The first is a review of the use of MacDonald’s *The Plague and I* by historians of medicine. The handful of scholars who have analyzed

⁷ Sayre, “Autobiography,” 242.

⁸ Paul John Eakin, “What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” *Narrative*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May, 2004), 124. Intention is one effective way to separate the genre of autobiography from letters, memoirs, diaries and other personal narratives. Historians have a disconcerting habit of consolidating these forms of writing, despite genres’ disparate objectives.

MacDonald's work through the feminist literary theory comprise the second part of the historiography.

In 1965 *American Quarterly*, the official publication of the American Studies Association, released an article by William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist entitled "Autobiography and the American Myth." The authors define autobiography as a medium that has nothing to do with "factual truth" and instead presents a "metaphor for raw experience" that communicates cultural values, specifically the changing substance of the American myth. While disavowing any connection between the genre and historical fact is excessive, this approach to an autobiographical source validates it as a reliable primary source for cultural analysis.⁹ According to Spengemann and Lundquist, the "narrative persona" of autobiography acts as a mediator between the actions of the "created character and the body of cultural value" which is recognized by the author and evaluated by the narrative persona. Autobiographical form and cultural beliefs are inseparable. The authors go one step further and suggest that autobiography is an act of analyzing "individual identity," a concept that has been at the core of Western cultural belief since St. Augustine's infamous "I." It would be remiss for a cultural historian, particularly one that studies modern Western culture, to exclude autobiography from analysis.¹⁰ Sayre states unequivocally that autobiographies are history in light of their ability to preserve facts which they both interpret and contain, to "select and narrate," but, primarily, to address an audience, and, in more subtle ways, create audiences." As a teaching tool, the correlations between the craft of history and the creation of autobiographies can introduce students to the concept of Wilhelm Dilthey's "primary historian," which Sayre sees exemplified in the autobiographer.¹¹

Although American Studies has done much in the way of legitimizing autobiography as an important primary source, it remains a complicated object of inquiry. In a tortuous examination of one small aspect of Henry Adams' autobiography, Paul John Eakin uses literary theory to ask if "autobiography can serve biography."¹² He concludes that the act of, and therefore the action taking place in, autobiography is a "biographical fact" and is a legitimate

⁹ William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist, "Autobiography and the American Myth," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn, 1965), 501-502, 516.

¹⁰ Ibid, 516 and 514.

¹¹ Robert F. Sayre, "The Proper Study – Autobiography and American Studies," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1977), 241 Ibid, 241 and 243.

¹² Paul John Eakin, "Henry James's 'Obscure Hurt': Can Autobiography Serve Biography?" *New Literary History*, Vol. 19, No. 3, History, Critics, and Criticism: Some Inquiries(Spring, 1988), pp. 675-692.

“primary focus of historical (and hence biographical) inquiry.”¹³ In other words, analyzing the events as told by the narrator of the autobiography as facts in themselves is of value. This is how historians of medicine have chosen to use MacDonald’s second book, *The Plague and I*, which MacDonald based on notes kept during her nine month stay at the sanatorium to cure her tuberculosis, from the fall of 1937 to the spring of 1938. The following first part of MacDonald’s historiography consists of publications that analyze the action that took place in the book. The focus of these publications is not postwar America, when *The Plague and I* was published (a decade after MacDonald had been released from the sanatorium).

In Matthew Caldwell’s *The Last Crusade: The War on Consumption, 1862-1954*, *The Plague and I* is seen as a unique incarnation of the sanatorium memoir, and one of the few to be published during the middle of the twentieth century. Katherine Ott, an associate professor of American Studies at George Washington University and curator for the Division of Medicine and Science for the National Museum of American History, in her book *Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture Since 1870*, refers readers to Caldwell for more information on MacDonald. Although MacDonald does not figure prominently in Ott’s study, the author misdated the time of MacDonald’s stay as 1920s rather than late 1930s.

Sheila M. Rothman, in *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History*, uses the narrative of *The Plague and I* throughout the chapter on sanatorium life as a framing device, substantiated by outside statistics, to inform readers of what daily life consisted of for patients in institutions during the first half of the twentieth century (like Firlands sanatorium, part of the Seattle Municipal Hospital. Rothman is a Professor Public Health in the Division of Sociomedical Sciences in the Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University as well as the assistant Deputy Director of the Center for the Study of Society and Medicine at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. She received a Ph.D in social history from Columbia University and her research examines American attitudes towards disease and disability. Rothman follows Betty through *The Plague and I*, frequently using Betty’s voice to explain the embarrassment of the intake process, the total boredom of complete bedrest, while at the same time corroborating MacDonald’s experience with other memoirs/autobiographies, primary source articles and pamphlets, interviews with medical staff and patients. She uses *The Plague*

¹³ Ibid, 679.

and I to illustrate how “fundamentally different was the experience of many Americans” in charitable institutions than the bourgeois European private institution presented in Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. By the 1920s and 1930s, sanatoriums in America “had become larger and the routine more rigid,” a system which isolated the patient from society and immersed them in an all encompassing, usually unpleasant institution.¹⁴ As a consequence sanatorium literature about that time period, like *The Plague and I*, focused on the experience with the disease, rather than provided a life history.¹⁵ In an endnote, Rothman states that “the grimness of the story and its similarity to other narratives of illness” belies the suggestion that MacDonald’s second book was an attempt to “further her fame.”¹⁶ Instead, Rothman characterizes the pre- World War II American sanatoriums as an institution rife with “unhappiness, disappointment, and despair.”¹⁷ Rothman characterizes *The Plague and I* as an “effort to explain how she contracted and coped with so stigmatized a disease” as well as the institution of the sanatorium.¹⁸

Although a combination of *The Plague and I* and Betty MacDonald’s celebrity may have done much to remove some of the stigma surrounding the disease, MacDonald herself went to considerable lengths to absolve herself of any culpability in contracting it. She explains that her tuberculosis was the result of employment in a poorly ventilated room with a co-worker “who looked like a cadaver and coughed constantly, with a dry little hacking cough, much of the time in [her] face.”¹⁹ When she excitedly told her boss she suspected he had tuberculosis he replied “Who don’t?”²⁰ She went so far as to file a compensation claim with the federal government, her employer when she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. While she and her co-workers received no compensation, it was confirmed that the cadaverous man had had active tuberculosis for nineteen years.²¹

Despite Rothman’s consistent use of *The Plague and I*, MacDonald’s experience is absent from Rothman’s discussion of “cousining” or sexual relationships between patients and

¹⁴ Sheila M. Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History* (BasicBooks, 1994), 227.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 299, n7.

¹⁷ Ibid, 226-227.

¹⁸ Ibid, 299 n7.

¹⁹ MacDonald, *The Plague and I*, (New York: Lippincott, 1948), 31.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rothman, 228. MacDonald, *The Plague and I*, 31.

movie night.²² MacDonald acknowledged in *The Plague and I* the characterization of people with tuberculosis as people possessing “a great sex urge,” which prompted the practice of a ten thirty curfew for the sanatorium nurses to ensure “no indulgence in SEX, thoughts of SEX, discussions of SEX, [even] literature concerned with SEX.”²³ Even at an event as innocent as Movie Night at the Pines “the sexes were carefully sorted. The men all on one side, the women all on the other side, the space between carefully patrolled by gimlet-eyed nurses with powerful flashlights to make sure that the sexes didn’t mingle in the dark.”²⁴

Rothman uses MacDonald’s *The Plague and I* as a teaching tool. She accepts Betty’s experiences at face value, relies on her perceptions to convey procedures, emotions, atmosphere and attitudes. *Living in the Shadow of Death* seeks to “correct the powerful stereotypes that have obscured the lives of the sick, to liberate them not only from the confines of the case record but also from the literary constructs that have distorted their experience.” But MacDonald’s narrative is not one that “demonstrate[s] the gap between the actual experiences of the sick and literary depictions of illness” – for Rothman’s study, MacDonald’s autobiographical novel is an accurate and relatable articulations of the 1930s American sanatorium experience. Rothman quotes *The Plague and I* most often, and sees MacDonald’s perspective as one of the best illustrations of the “elaborate patient subculture developed within the sanatorium.”²⁵ Rothman concludes the chapter examining the social relationship between medical staff and patients, pulling long quotes from *The Plague and I* to paint a picture of the American sanatorium experience. Using phrases such as “MacDonald reported” and “MacDonald observed” implies that Rothman makes no distinction between Betty MacDonald the author and Betty MacDonald the narrative persona.

Since such an excellent analysis of MacDonald’s sanatorium memoir has already been provided by these scholars, this thesis will not discuss *The Plague and I* in that context. Instead, like all of MacDonald’s works, the book will be used in the chapters that address race, class, and gender.

²² Rothman, 236.

²³ MacDonald. *Plague and I*, 69 and 125.

²⁴ MacDonald, *Plague and I*, 187. MacDonald, because of her rebellious behavior, was allowed to attend only one Movie Night at the Pines: “I found that sitting on a bed with a pillow behind my head was the most comfortable why ever devised for seeing a motion picture but I thought the picture itself rather a tactless choice for the joyous entertainment of patients in a tuberculosis sanatorium. It was Greta Garbo in *Camille*.”

²⁵ Rothman, 8 and 234.



While historians of medicine have mentioned Betty MacDonald's sanatorium memoir, the majority of scholarly attention and analysis that has been given to MacDonald's work has been focused through the lens of feminist literary theory. The following section consists of publications which analyzed not only the action in the books but the social, cultural and historical contexts surrounding the time when they were published. They include MacDonald in their scholarship because they are categorizing her as a domestic humorist – a label that fails to include her larger impact and importance in American culture.

Nancy A. Walker, a professor of English and former director of Women's Studies at Vanderbilt University, is one of the first scholars to consider MacDonald's works seriously. She included a chapter from *The Egg and I* in her edited work *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*, in which she and co-editor Zita Dresner establish MacDonald as one of the forerunners of the domestic humor genre that gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s with writers such as Shirley Jackson and Erma Bombeck. The other forerunner of the genre is Cornelia Otis Skinner, who published six years before MacDonald. While Walker and Dresner see Skinner as establishing the self-deprecatory style that would become a hallmark of the genre (and female humorists in general), they attribute MacDonald with the ability of "calling a spade a spade – and there were many spades" and presenting a type of stark honesty not customarily associated with the genre.²⁶

In her first published work *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Walker offers a more detailed analysis of *The Egg and I*. It is Walker's assertion that MacDonald's lack of direct commentary on the patriarchal nature of marriage and imbalance in gender roles had little to do with MacDonald's 1920s marriage, but instead heralded the "back-to-the-kitchen" ideology that surrounded World War II marriage.²⁷ Nancy Walker offers two characterizations of *The Egg and I*: a book that represented the "full flowering" of the domestic saga that began in the early nineteenth century as well as a work that "heralded in humor" the

²⁶ Nancy Walker and Zita Dresner, *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988) 271, 280.

²⁷ Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988): 124.

“‘back-to-the-kitchen’ suburban movement that followed World War II.’”²⁸ According to Walker, authors like MacDonald or Erma Bombeck or Marietta Holley are outside the “sense of shared oppression” that characterizes the past 150 years of American women’s humor and managed to operate outside the “paradoxical situation in which a tradition has been effectively submerged or hidden – hidden not least from the members of the group that have created it and whom it most directly concerns.”²⁹

Kristi Siegel in *Women’s Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism* also sees the *Egg and I* in the context of Americans 1940’s and 1950’s marriage, and adds that the work can be interpreted as a refutation of the roles of wife and daughter, in which the humor merely masks bitter resentment.³⁰ Similarly, Jane Levey’s article “Imagining the Family in Postwar Popular Culture: The Case of *The Egg and I* and *Cheaper by the Dozen*” situates MacDonald in the era in which she published rather than the time period the action in the autobiographical work took place.³¹ She asserts that MacDonald was “deflecting risk by drawing on nostalgia and the conventions of first-person memoir” in order to filter “contemporary anxieties through stories ostensibly removed from the postwar moment.”³² Levey offers the closest analysis of *The Egg and I* to date.

In their publication *Merry Wives and Others: a History of Domestic Humor Writing*, authors Penelope Fritzer and Bartholomew Bland also acknowledge MacDonald’s place at the forefront of the domestic humor genre. MacDonald’s distinction in this canon, they assert, lies not only in her chronological placement but also in the fact that, until the 1980s, MacDonald is the only humorous author to have two domestic novels in two different settings with two different husbands (Robert Heskett and Donald MacDonald). The last work is the only to incorporate any of MacDonald’s other works (albeit briefly).³³

Fritzer and Bland’s treatment of MacDonald is the most recent and least gendered. Like Walker and Dresner’s connection between Thurber and MacDonald, Fritzer and Bland

²⁸ Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 48 and 124.

²⁹ Walker, *Very Serious Thing*, 119-120.

³⁰ Kristi Siegel, *Women’s Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1999): 76.

³¹ Jane F. Levey, “Imagining the Family in U.S. Postwar Popular Culture: The Case of *The Egg and I* and *Cheaper by the Dozen*,” *Journal of Women’s History* Vol. 13, No. 3. (Autumn 2001), Jane Levey was an American Studies PhD candidate at Yale University until she died of leukemia in 1999. This article was posthumously released. I wish to extend my sincere thanks to whoever made this publication possible.

³² Levey, “Imagining the Family,” 144.

³³ Penelope Fritzer and Bartholomew Bland, *Merry Wives and Others: A History of Domestic Humor Writing*, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2002) 25.

establishes a crucial connection by comparing the wilderness around the chicken ranch with Mark Twain's use of the Mississippi in *Huckleberry Finn*, a point which will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. They offer the most detailed biography to date and mention all four of her autobiographical works in their analysis. However, *Merry Wives* connects MacDonald's portrayal of her husband to a hallmark of the domestic humor genre: the one-dimensional husband. The distant characterization of Bob is a marked contrast to the "affectionate and personal way" she writes about rural neighbors, like the Kettles, .³⁴

Fritzer and Bland recount the action in *The Egg and I* with sympathy, which they also extend to Bob, Betty's husband. They mention the use of Betty's inheritance to purchase the ranch in order to explain what they perceive as MacDonald's lack of "personal" complaints about her husband and realization that "she cannot tolerate the life he chose" is the real source of her ire.³⁵ They also assert that the opening chapters in each of her autobiographical works indicate that she was "much more bonded with her original family of mother, sisters, and brother than she [was] with her new husband and the family she makes with him."³⁶

Most scholars dismiss MacDonald's last three autobiographical works (*The Plague and I*, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, and *Onions in the Stew*) on the basis that they did not reach the meteoric heights that *The Egg and I* achieved.³⁷ Yet an analysis of Betty MacDonald's contribution to the canon of American humor is incomplete without the inclusion of these works, which were popular with contemporary audiences and serialized in prominent American magazines. While the existing analyses of MacDonald are well-done and do much to establish her as subject worthy of academic interest, they pigeonhole her into the category of domestic humorist – a category that is ill-fitting for an author who was not writing from a 1950s suburban home. MacDonald's subject matter includes rural, urban, and institutional America and spans three generations. Typecasting her as a domestic humorist has not accorded her an accurate place in the American humor tradition and has limited the scope of her historical significance.

³⁴ Fritzer and Bland, *Merry Wives*, 26.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 27.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 26-27.

³⁷ MacDonald's biographical entry in Walker and Dresner's *Redressing the Balance* concludes that these works are "ultimately less engaging" as well as less popular, despite the fact that they are in the same style of *The Egg and I*. (279).

CHAPTER 2

DOUBLE YOLK – CONTEXTUALIZING BETTY’S WEDDED BLISS

“Along with teaching us that lamb must be cooked with garlic and that a lady never scratches her head or spits, my mother taught my sisters and me that is a wife’s bounden duty to see that her husband is happy in his work...”³⁸

Academic discussion of MacDonald’s works casts *The Egg and I* as a critique of American post-World War II marriage, placing MacDonald firmly in post-World War II culture, arguing that her book, though set in the past, as a critique of the newly emerging, highly gendered marriage ideal, which explains why it resonated so strongly with readers in 1946. The opening of *The Egg and I* seems to support this view.

Despite MacDonald’s sardonic treatment of her duties as a rural housewife, she did not protest the institution of marriage with its highly gendered relegation of roles. Rather she presents a subtler critique of her husband’s failure to provide the emotional fulfillment exemplified by her mother’s marriage, from which this advice stems. Also, by not placing *The Egg and I* in the larger context of MacDonald’s other books, scholars failed to incorporate the broader narrative of marriage, divorce, and remarriage that she explored. Because the opening line is humorous, the scholars treated it as sardonic; but MacDonald spends the next chapter supporting its fundamental truth by her loving characterization of her parents’ marriage. The imposed perception of sarcasm does injustice to the closeness and respect MacDonald had for her family, a strong current throughout her later publications. This interpretation set the tones for the critiques.

This chapter provides a closer analysis and a more detailed historical contextualization of the autobiographical works. It also offers a reassessment of what MacDonald is saying about the mid-century American institution of marriage, beginning with her parents marriage and ending with MacDonald’s second marriage. Rather than using a book-by-book analysis, this chapter approaches the material in a biographically chronological manner.



³⁸ Betty MacDonald, *The Egg and I*, (New York: Lippincott, 1945), 11.

To begin to understand that bigger picture, it is necessary to first place MacDonald's advice at the opening of this chapter in its own context. Although MacDonald is consistently situated as a Pacific Northwest author, her parents met and married in Massachusetts, where her father, Darsie Bard, was working his way through Harvard. He met his wife, then Elsie Sanderson, while tutoring her brother. To her patrician family's horror, they were married in 1902. Disliking the name Elsie, she and Darsie agreed upon her father and grandfather's name, Sydney, and this change was just the start of a new identity.³⁹ From MacDonald's point of view, the marriage enabled Sydney to come into her own and shake off her confining Eastern roots. The first chapter of *The Egg and I* qualified its opening motherly advice by painting an attractive picture of her parents' marriage. A few lines after the much quoted opening MacDonald wrote, "This 'I'll-go-where-you-go-do-what-you-do-be-what-you-are-U'll-be-happy' philosophy worked out splendidly for Mother, for she followed my mining engineer father all over the United States and led a fascinating life."⁴⁰ The Bards ended up in Butte, Montana, where their first child, Mary, was born. Anne Elizabeth Campbell Bard (Betty) was born in Boulder, Colorado, followed by the births of her brother Cleve and sister Dede. When Sydney was pregnant with her last child, Allison, and Betty was twelve years old, Darsie Bard died of streptococcal pneumonia. Sydney never remarried.⁴¹

Darsie and Sydney Bard's marriage reconciled the problems of the Victorian marriage, in which "the ideal of intimacy was continually undermined in practice by the reality of the different constraints on men and women, leading to a 'sense of estrangement' between many husbands and wives."⁴² Darsie and Sydney moved independently within their separate spheres of responsibility and still shared intimacy based on an acknowledgment of individuality and the shared adventure of their marriage. The concept of "wifely duty" had a different meaning for Sydney Bard: it was an obligation filled with joy and satisfaction, not an imposed burden. Sydney and Darsie Bard's married life could never be called easy, but it certainly appeared idyllic to MacDonald, who saw it as a blueprint for a happy marriage.

But the Bard household contained other, sometimes conflicting narratives on marriage. Sydney and Darsie Bard's union was characterized by cooperation, adventure, companionship

³⁹ Betty MacDonald, *The Egg and I*, (New York: Lippincott, 1945), 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 32.

⁴² Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, (New York: Viking, 2005), 188.

and mutual adoration; but the constant and beloved fixture of Gammy, MacDonald's en residence paternal grandmother, offered evidence of other possible outcomes. Her husband, James Bard of Kentucky, had taken "his wife out West, played Faro with his money, his wife's money and even some of his company's money and then tactfully disappeared and was always spoken of as dead."⁴³ Gammy exhibited an enduring hatred for the opposite sex and would caution her granddaughters that "the world's run for Men and don't you forget it."⁴⁴ From her grandparents to her parents, MacDonald witnessed the progression of the American marriage from one generation to the next. From her point of view, Sydney and Darsie worked within the confines of separate spheres and gender roles; yet through a sense of equality and appreciation for one another as individuals, and a sincere desire to for the other's personal fulfillment, they seemed to resolved the problems of preceding generations. The contrast with Gammy's disastrous marriage emphasized the point that the people involved made the marriage, not the institution itself.

From the background she provide in the first two chapters of *The Egg and I*, MacDonald expected the relationship between husband and wife to be a horizontal dynamic that supported the partners' reaching across well-maintained spheres, rather than a vertical hierarchy proceeding from the patriarchal head. MacDonald took such pains to illustrate the success of her parents' union that the interpretation of her railing against the gendered construction her parents' union seems unlikely. She celebrated the fact that despite her breadwinner/housewife dynamic, they did not seem affected by proscriptions on behavior that prohibited a true partnership. The first chapters set out to illustrate a theory of marriage, texted and proved by her parents – one which, when MacDonald applied it to her own, had very different results.

The concept of the "New Woman of the 1920s" set a different standard for behavior in dating young women, as exhibited by MacDonald's sister Mary who enjoyed great success in social situations and dating; but MacDonald described herself as a teenager who preferred to remain at home.⁴⁵ MacDonald attributed her lack of dating success to braces and high grades that enabled her to become a sophomore in college by the age of seventeen. It was at this age that she met Robert Heskett, a friend of her brother's and thirteen years her senior. MacDonald

⁴³ MacDonald, *Egg*, 14.

⁴⁴ MacDonald, *Egg*, 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

described him during their courtship as a man possessing a “kindly, gentle way.”⁴⁶ After a courtship of less than a year, they were married four months after her eighteenth birthday in July of 1927. MacDonald described herself as a girl overcome by an older, handsome man’s attraction for her, giving the reader the impression that she had been invisible to the opposite sex until his arrival. He seemed poised to whisk her off into a new, adventurous life, just as Darsie had done for Sydney.

MacDonald’s considerable annoyance with her maternal grandmother’s letters addressed to “the Child Bride” indicates that, by the East Coast family’s standards, she was marrying young. Since Sydney Bard’s marriage at the beginning of the twentieth century, the age of marriage had decreased, while the rate of marriage had increased. MacDonald’s first marriage spanned the onset of the Great Depression, beginning two years before the stock market crash of 1929 and ending two years after it. The Depression changed the character of American marriage. It raised the age of marriage, since establishing a separate household and other costs associated with new marital unions made marriage too expensive for some couples.⁴⁷ It is not surprising that only 33.7% of women in MacDonald’s age group were married in 1930.⁴⁸ The majority of women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two (62%) were classified as never married/single by the 1930 census.⁴⁹ Of the women who were married, only 23.9% of married women in MacDonald’s age group were eighteen years old at their first marriage.⁵⁰

During the Heskett’s honeymoon, he began exhibiting behavior that contradicted the pre-marriage persona with whom she had fallen in love. MacDonald chose a site that represented happy memories of previous family vacations, Victoria in British Columbia. In the face of what even MacDonald admits is a boring honeymoon site, Heskett transformed from the “dear, gay, understanding companion of [their] courtship days” into a sulking figure who “sat with chin on

⁴⁶ MacDonald, *Egg*, 37.

⁴⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, (New York: Viking, 2005), 207. Kristin Cejello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 241.

⁴⁸ Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0* [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 2010. The Integrated Public Use Microdata Series has taken high-precision samples from fifteen federal censuses. Of the samples used in this thesis, 1930, 1940 and 1950 were all 1 in 100 national random samples of the population. The 1940 and the 1950 samples are weighted samples. Data was analyzed online at IPUMS-USA website: <http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

chest, staring moodily.”⁵¹ His inability and unwillingness to enjoy the present moment provided a stark contrast to Sydney and Darsie’s characteristic enthusiasm when traveling together.⁵² MacDonald used the boat trip to and from their honeymoon to frame Heskett’s metamorphosis from unassuming insurance salesman to aspiring chicken ranch owner. On the way to Victoria, MacDonald vowed to ask her “mother just how much [she] should learn about insurance in order to be helpful and not meddlesome, and wondered what the wives of insurance men were like for friends.”⁵³ On the return trip from the honeymoon, Heskett nostalgically recalled a chicken ranch job and mentioned a farm that could easily be purchased for the purpose. When Heskett asked his new wife’s opinion on the matter, MacDonald fell back on her mother’s marital advice: “Mother had taught me that a husband must be happy in his work, and if Bob wanted to be happy in the chicken business I didn’t care...I could hold up my end. That’s what I thought.”⁵⁴ The next paragraph begins: “Why in God’s name does everyone want to go into the chicken business? Why has it become the common man’s Holy Grail?”⁵⁵ MacDonald’s following attempt to analyze her husband’s dream shows her endeavoring to understand his aspirations, and her willingness to assume a supporting role, as per her mother’s advice, which worked beautifully in Sydney’s case, as when a few months after MacDonald’s birth, Sydney received a telegram from Darsie stating “Leaving for Mexico City for two years Thursday – be ready if you want to come along.”⁵⁶ Sydney was, and did. The spontaneity that characterized her mother’s marriage, coupled with Sydney’s ideology of wifely duty, provided a context of acceptance that allowed MacDonald to embrace the transformation in her husband that occurred on their honeymoon. It was Sydney’s influence and “opinion of wifely duty” that persuaded MacDonald to follow her husband to the small chicken ranch near Port Townsend on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula.⁵⁷

In light of her husband’s abrupt career change, MacDonald decided to become “in record time a model farm wife, a veritable one-man-production line, somewhere between a Grant Wood

⁵¹ MacDonald, *Egg*, 38.

⁵² *The Egg and I* refers several times to Sydney and Darsie traveling together, often without their children. The reader gets the sense in the beginning of the book that travel was a major part of their intimate, private relationship.

⁵³ MacDonald, *Egg*, 38

⁵⁴ MacDonald, *Egg*, 39.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ MacDonald, *Egg*, 15.

⁵⁷ Siegel, *Women’s Autobiographies*, 111.

painting, an Old Dutch Cleanser advertisement and Mrs. Lincoln's cook book."⁵⁸ MacDonald's enthusiasm and energetic willingness to accept the gendered requirements of her place as wife was obvious in the beginning of *The Egg and I*, the humor good-natured rather than cynical. Although Levey asserts that MacDonald was "protesting the demands of her wifely role," a theme that she believed resonated with postwar readers, a closer reading suggests that MacDonald acknowledged and embraced the separate spheres of responsibility.⁵⁹

Her most strident protests surfaced when she was required to support her husband in his endeavors as a provider with no reciprocity (and often hindrance) from him for the herculean task of rural housewife. Her husband demanded that she flush and retrieve game (the role typically performed by a well-trained dog) while he is engaged in the traditionally male occupation of hunting.⁶⁰ The care and feeding of the baby chicks, critical to the ranch's success, was solely her responsibility. Heskett interrupted her household tasks, which MacDonald considered her sphere, constantly so that MacDonald could assist him in improvements around the ranch, tasks that MacDonald viewed herself unsuited for and in the exclusive purview of her husband. "If only I had studied carpentry or mule skinning instead of ballet,' I wailed as I teetered on the ridgepole of the chicken house pounding my already mashed thumbs and expecting momentarily to swallow the mouthful of single nails which pierced my gums and jabbed into my cheeks."⁶¹ In contrast, the marriage modeled by her parents involved an urban setting from which Darsie was absent for long periods of time, giving Sydney a great deal of autonomy but less of a direct role in the economic provisions of the household.

MacDonald would have happily assumed the role of housewife, particularly in the 1930s modern, middle-class, urban-dwelling housewife. The fourth chapter, tellingly titled "The Vanquished," she walks the reader through a day-by-day account of a week's worth of the farm wife's chores. Betty's workload is heavy but not uncommon. Married women spent more than thirty hours a week engaged in household chores, longer for rural housewives.⁶² While housewives in the 1920s were cast as maladjusted if still discontent with their lot in modern appliances, MacDonald and Heskett traded a waffle iron, toaster and electric lamps (wedding

⁵⁸ MacDonald, *Egg*, 75.

⁵⁹ Levey, "Imagining the Family," 130.

⁶⁰ MacDonald's deep affection for their dog Sport, who Heskett purchased on the pretense of his fierceness, but turned out to be a cowardly hound, underscores this parallel. MacDonald describes herself and Sport in *The Egg and I* as seeming "to have no vocational guidance", 250.

⁶¹ MacDonald, *Egg*, 158.

⁶² Coontz, *Marriage A History*, 210.

presents) for a drag saw, gasoline/kerosene lamps and a sad-iron, turning the technological clock back.⁶³

Despite MacDonald's tongue-in-cheek approach to the rigors of daily life as a rural farmwife, the husband was MacDonald's focus of ruefully sardonic humor, not marriage itself. Far from the "disdain and pity" Levey purports MacDonald has for the "sterile" Birdie Hicks, who supposedly exemplifies the embodiment of the ideal farmwife, MacDonald characterized Hicks as "a remarkable woman" who shouldered a staggering work load most capably.⁶⁴ MacDonald's target was, therefore, not the role of housewife itself. *The Egg and I* mentioned a dozen marriage, some in passing, others in more detail, and MacDonald commented on most of them in some way. According to Walker, Birdie Hicks represents the "stereotype of impossible perfection" and one of the "impossibly capable women in women's humor," stereotypes that are symbolic of the authors' rejection of "the cultural forces that have created them."⁶⁵ Walker contends that "the author locates the error not in the individual woman, but in a culture that sets the standards for her behavior and performance," but it seems clear that if the wife in question is suffering, MacDonald laced the blame squarely on the shoulders of the husband.

For example, Maw Kettle (who would later be the basis of the immensely popular Ma and Pa Kettle characters) began her marriage as a clean and orderly wife. The constant slovenliness of her husband eventually led her to give up and say "I can't make Paw change and be neat, so I'll have to change and be dirty, or it'll be fight, fight, fight all our lives."⁶⁶ The Maddock farm was the antithesis of the Kettle's ranch with "barns like Carnation Milk advertisements" and impeccably clean, thoroughly modern facilities.⁶⁷ The house, in contrast, was dark and stifling with an inadequate kitchen that featured a wife as "dark and dreary as her house" who had not left the farm for twenty-seven years.⁶⁸ When Mr. Maddock asked what the Heskett's thought of his farm, MacDonald stated that she was too ladylike to answer, indicating her strong disapproval. Mrs. Weatherby's pretensions of sophistication ("I don't know how I'm going to go through a winter without the symphony, the theatah or the dahnse") are hilarious to Heskett in light of her raggedy clothing, filthy children and midden pile of a front lawn, but

⁶³ MacDonald, *Egg*, 60. Coontz, *Marriage A History*, 210.

⁶⁴ Levey, "Imagining the Family," 135. MacDonald, *Egg*, 170.

⁶⁵ Walker, *Very Serious Thing*, 65.

⁶⁶ MacDonald, *Egg*, 133. This is the only verbatim quote from the book in the much-reworked movie version. More discussion of this follows in Chapter Five.

⁶⁷ MacDonald, *Egg*, 133.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

MacDonald had nothing but sympathy for the woman of unknown origins who “Married the most worthless, drunken Indian in the whole country...[who] beats her unconscious every Saturday night” according to Maw Kettle.⁶⁹ From her parents’ examples, MacDonald knew that the institution of American marriage as a sound one. The only difference between her mother’s marriage and her own (as well as those of the hapless wives she encountered) was the lack of a sympathetic partner.

Despite her sympathy for the rural housewives she encountered, she also used them as foils for her incompetence, and noted on several occasions their horror and amusement at her lack of farmwife skills. It seemed MacDonald faced criticism from nearly every corner of country society, both male and female alike. But by far her “most consistent critic is her husband.”⁷⁰ Heskett, whom MacDonald “accused of having been sired by a vacuum cleaner, was of that delightful old school of husbands who lift up the mattresses to see if the little woman has dusted the springs.”⁷¹ *The Egg and I* makes it clear that it is not Heskett’s standards that are the problem; it is the lack of true partnership, the spilling over of his role as employer from the farmyard into the farmhouse.

Even given the rural hardships, MacDonald still evinced a willingness to be confined to traditional gender roles. Yet there is a strong, recurrent theme of discontent throughout *The Egg and I*. It was not, as Griswold contends, Heskett’s incompetence as a husband or even his failure to live up to the postwar ideal of masculinity (which MacDonald would not consciously apply to a 1920s marriage) but rather the lack of respect and reciprocity in the relationship, something distinctly modeled by MacDonald’s parents.⁷² The contrast with her own marriage is demonstrated in MacDonald’s attitude about the laundry:

Bob was irritating casual about my washing and ironing and was continually putting on clean clothes, when he could get them away from me... I got to be just like a dog with a bone over anything I had washed and ironed. It wasn’t that I wanted him to act like the advertisements and come dancing into the kitchen clutching a clean shirt and yelling ‘No

⁶⁹ MacDonald, *Egg*, 159. It is significant that MacDonald saw more parallels between her situation and that of Mrs. Weatherby’s than Mrs. Maddock’s or Maw Kettle’s.

⁷⁰ Walker, *Women’s Humor*, 51.

⁷¹ MacDonald, *Egg*, 74.

⁷² Robert L. Griswold, “If Not Ward Cleaver, Then Who?” *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 13, no.3, (Autumn 2001), 162.

tattle-tale gray this week, little Soft-Hands!’ It was just that I wanted him to be conscious of the fact that it took a terrific amount of back-breaking labor to keep us in clean clothes and occasionally to comment on it. ‘Heaven knows,’ I would say in exasperation, ‘You expect and get praise for your work – acting like you delivered every egg with high forceps.’ I was that way on winter Mondays and Tuesdays – it all seemed so futile.⁷³

Walker and Levey acknowledge MacDonald’s discontent but fail to read further. Walker underscores the growing emotional distance between husband and wife by recounting the awkwardness they felt when waiting for a babysitter so they can go on a “date” to town but does not include MacDonald’s telling reflection that “[h]usband and wife teamwork is just fine except when it reaches a point where the husband is more conscious of the weight this wife’s shoulder carries than of the shoulder.”⁷⁴ Levey analyzes MacDonald’s statement to Heskett that eventually they would not be on a first name basis, but not the fact that after an unexpected kiss on the back of her neck MacDonald became “confused as though an old boss had chosen that means of rewarding me for a nice typing job.”⁷⁵ This quote underscores the type of worker-boss relationship engendered by a farm marriage, something not typically seen in the postwar suburban culture MacDonald was supposedly skewering.

The disparate natures of Heskett and MacDonald were highlighted by a trip to a derelict mansion, originally built by a lumber tycoon for his young, South American bride, who deserted him after one year (a fact related with complete sympathy for the fleeing bride by MacDonald). Heskett mused about hauling away the timber for a new chicken coop, in contrast to the reactions of MacDonald, Jerry, and his wife who were swept away by the romance of the setting and moved by the sad story. The visit occurs near the end of the book, and the tale of the lonely South American bride foreshadowed MacDonald’s own departure.

Their fundamental incompatibility and the lack of acknowledgment, much less intimacy, culminated in the Heskett’s divorce. “Finally in March, 1931, after four years of this, I wrote to

⁷³ MacDonald, *Egg*, 70-1.

⁷⁴ Walker, *Women’s Humor*, 67. MacDonald, *Egg*, 285.

⁷⁵ Levey, “Imagining the Family,” 133. MacDonald, *Egg*, 109.

my family and told them that I hated chickens, I was lonely and I seemed to have married the wrong man.”⁷⁶ Despite the light wording, divorce was a serious endeavor during the Depression. The national economic situation made divorce difficult for financial reasons. However, MacDonald’s separation and divorce shares many characteristics with the few divorces that were taking place in 1930s America.

In 1931, the year she filed for divorce, three-fourths of all divorces in the North and Pacific regions were awarded to wives.⁷⁷ Since Washington did not become a no-fault divorce state until 1973, specific grounds were necessary.⁷⁸ MacDonald’s grounds of cruelty were not uncommon either. The majority of states required that divorce be an adversarial process, requiring that one accuse and prove the other party of fault. However some divorces were less contentious even though operating within the adversarial legal framework, with both parties working together to create a fiction that would provide a legal separation desired by both parties. Alleging cruelty as the cause of divorce was the most popular among the friendly fiction set of married couples. Claiming cruelty was less unpleasant and detrimental to the husband and allowed for the greatest amount of vagueness.⁷⁹ However, Heskett’s failure to stay in touch with his children, and the fact that they adopted their stepfather’s name indicate that this was not an amicable divorce.⁸⁰

The median duration of marriage to divorce in 1931 was 7.1 years; MacDonald’s marriage lasted only four years.⁸¹ The onset of the Depression may have been the deciding factor in the majority of the rare divorces that occurred, but MacDonald never characterized her marital problems as financial ones. This could be attributed to a reluctance to cast Heskett as unable to provide, an accusation that would contradict MacDonald’s portrait of her husband as a mountain of competence.

⁷⁶ MacDonald, *Anybody*, 31.

⁷⁷ Lawrence M. Friedman and Robert V. Percival, “Who Sues for Divorce? From Fault Through Fiction to Freedom,” *Journal of Legal Studies* Vol. 51, No. 4, Families and the Law (Oct., 2002), 321.

⁷⁸ Denese Ashbaugh Vlosky and Pamela A. Monroe, “The Effective Dates of No-Fault Divorce Laws in the 50 States,” *Family Relations* Vol. 51, No. 4, Families and the Law (Oct., 2002), 321.

⁷⁹ Friedman, “Who Sues?” 65.

⁸⁰ MacDonald’s relocation from the farm to the city was not unusual. The 69.3% of divorced women in her age group were classified as having urban status. The Census data only reflects the urban/rural status of women already divorced. However, it does indicate that the majority of divorced women in 1930 were already located in or relocated to an urban setting before, during or after their divorce. Ruggles.

⁸¹ Alexander A. Plateris, “100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics, United States, 1867-1967.” DHEW Publication No. (HRA) 74-1902. U.S. Departments of Health, Education, and Welfare. Public Health Service. Health Resources Administration, National Center for Health Statistics. Rockville, Md. December 1973, 39.

Of women age twenty to twenty-five in 1930, 51% were married, and 43.1% were never married/single. Only 1.2% of women in MacDonald's age group were divorced, while another 3.5% were married but the spouse was absent. Although it seems that many unhappy couples simply separated without a legal divorce, MacDonald may have felt compelled to legalize her separation for employment reasons. The majority of states had statutes on the books that prevented both husband and wife from being employed, and there was considerable social stigma against working wives, particularly those with children.⁸²

Although MacDonald had a waiting, albeit financially insecure, support system, the decision to divorce with children during the Depression was a hazardous prospect. The majority (60.6%) of divorced women between the ages of twenty and twenty-five in 1930 had no children. Only 9% of divorced women in MacDonald's age group had two children. However, of divorces that occurred that involved children, the mean number of children per divorce with children in 1931 was 1.76.⁸³

Despite the fact that MacDonald was escaping from a deeply emotionally isolating situation to the warmth and support of her family, she still faced social stigma as a divorced mother of two. During the time she lived with her mother and sisters, MacDonald contracted tuberculosis and was admitted as a charity case to Firlands, a sanatorium north of Seattle. An incident during the admission process illustrates the prevailing attitude toward divorced mothers. "What is your full name, Mrs. Bard?" I said, "It's Miss Bard. Miss Betty Bard. You see I have always used my maiden name in business and... ." The rest of what I was about to say went dribbling back down my throat for the nurse was looking at me with eyes that could have been taken out and used to replace diamond drills. She said, "You have children, haven't you?" "Yes," I said almost adding, involuntarily, "Mr. District Attorney." She said, "You're Mrs. Bard, then."⁸⁴

The stigma against divorced women also surfaces in MacDonald's third book, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, which chronicles her life as a single, working mother in the midst of the Depression. During one of their many vigorous office fights, MacDonald and her sister Mary exchange insults which, tellingly, center around marital status. She shouted, "It's no wonder

⁸² Cott, *Public Vows*, 172.

⁸³ Plateris, "100 Years of Marriage," 45.

⁸⁴ MacDonald, *Plague*, 50.

you're an old maid, for twenty-five years you've always gotten your own way and you think you can boss everybody!" and Mary screamed back, "It's better to be twenty-five years old and unmarried than to shuffle through my old marriage licenses like a deck of cards."⁸⁵ Women, even vivacious, attractive and charming women like Mary Bard, ran the risk of spinsterhood if not married by thirty. However, MacDonald's marital fate revealed the danger at the other end of the spectrum, the choice made too early and hastily due to youthful poor judgment which results in socially stigmatizing divorce.

This fear of spinsterhood reached its peak during World War II, when there existed a prevalent belief, aided in some part by the media, that those who failed to marry during the war lost any chance of doing so later. One study reported that the likelihood of marriage at fifteen halved by age thirty.⁸⁶ In 1940, of women between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-two, 74% were married, 16.8% were classified as never married/single, and only 2.3% were divorced. Census records show that 55.1% of divorced women between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-two had no children. While 26.3% of divorced women in the same group had one child, 12.6% had two.⁸⁷ MacDonald was part of a small minority competing with previously unmarried (and childless) women for husbands, yet she met and married a man two years her junior. Betty Bard Heskett became Mrs. Donald MacDonald in 1942, a little over a decade after her divorce was finalized. That same year the MacDonalds, including her daughters Anne and Joan, moved to a house on Vashon Island, across Puget Sound from Seattle where MacDonald still worked, and she began writing *The Egg and I*.

In March of 1946, the year of *The Egg and I*'s astounding success, *Life* magazine included a feature on MacDonald and her family. The article stated that the book had sold 250,000 copies and had been the number one best-selling fiction book for the past ten weeks, its author earning \$40,000 in less than a year (equivalent to more than \$500,000 today). It characterized MacDonald, a "pretty and ebullient red-head of 37 who looks ten years younger," as the loyal wife who dutifully and willingly followed her husband. The article assured the reader of the husband's success. MacDonald's past is covered briefly in an oddly worded sentence: "After four years in the chicken business, during which she bore two daughters, Mrs.

⁸⁵ MacDonald, *Anybody*, 64.

⁸⁶ Celello, *Making Marriage Work*, 52.

⁸⁷ Ruggles, *IPUMS*.

MacDonald moved from the chicken farm, left her husband.”⁸⁸ The article goes on to mention MacDonald’s bout with tuberculosis and her recovery, and her second marriage, to real estate agent Donald MacDonald. This article acquainted America with MacDonald’s marital history and made it clear to readers that the husband she was happily married to was not the husband of her popular book.

By 1940, the median age at marriage was 23.2, more than five years older than MacDonald was at her first marriage, a year older than she was at her divorce.⁸⁹ The war had created a large audience for new brides. In 1946, the year *Life* featured the article on MacDonald, the marriage rate was the highest in a 100-year period.⁹⁰ That same year the divorce rate rose to 17.9, the highest between 1920 and 1967. *The Egg and I* held appeal for both the newly married brides who were currently laboring in marriage, and the increasing ranks of divorced women who were aware that MacDonald’s happy ending did not include her original husband.

Levey asserts that *The Egg and I* appealed especially to the wives of returning war veterans, as women who were unhappy with their back-to-the-kitchen marching orders: “While a vast amount of popular prescriptive literature was spelling out women’s civic obligation to help returning male veterans readjust, *The Egg and I* questioned the wife’s ‘bounden duty’ to her husband.”⁹¹ *The Egg and I* may have resonated with these women, but MacDonald portrayed Heskett as a long-suffering husband struggling under the burden of his wife’s incompetency, not as an inept husband whose patriarchal role was overshadowed by his wife’s newly-found confidence.

The over-competent husband narrative may have filled a gap that prescriptive literature was not addressing at the time. While readjustment literature begged wives to play down their competence and weather the outbursts of the returning World War II veterans, MacDonald’s emphasis on her husband’s reaction to her complete incompetence in all ranch-related tasks offered a different narrative.⁹² One of MacDonald’s few references to Heskett’s military career was to remark that “instead of being shell-shocked he carried home a fixation that a helmetful of water was enough to wash anything,” (a theory that led to MacDonald carrying the majority of

⁸⁸ Staff reporter, *Life*, “Life Goes Calling on the Author of *The Egg and I*,” (March 18 1946), 35.

⁸⁹ Plateris, “100 Years of Marriage,” 53.

⁹⁰ Plateris, “100 Years of Marriage,” 24. 118.1 per 1,000 unmarried aged fifteen and older.

⁹¹ Levey, “Imagining the Family,” 131.

⁹² Cott, *Public Vows*, 190.

her wash water).⁹³ While the literature stressed that the returning veteran “needed and desired feminine women who could be sensitive and adjust their interests and desires to those of their men...[that could] make the veteran feel secure, tolerate his outbursts, and refrain from questioning his decisions and nagging,” MacDonald’s narrative might have appealed to readers who had not become Rosie the Riveter.⁹⁴ “While I jounced and eased my way along from day to day, Bob sailed along in front of me never once touching the rough spots. He never seemed to be lonely, he enjoyed the work, he didn’t make stupid blunders and then, of course, he wasn’t pregnant.”⁹⁵

Levey had a valid point about *The Egg and I* as a venue outside of the traditional straightforward advice writing:

Popular narratives about the family proved fertile territory for working through social tensions and cultural transformations taking place. People were at least as likely – if not more inclined- to draw their ‘designs for living’ from popular forms, as from expert pronouncements. Where advice literature prescribes how people ought to behave, narrative forms of popular culture engage audiences differently. Their stories hold the power to reinvent social relations, presenting audiences with a palette of imaginative possibilities.⁹⁶

Her observation applies to the rest of MacDonald’s writing as well. Scholars analyzing *The Egg and I* are dismissive of *Anybody Can Do Anything*, on the grounds that its success did not nearly reach the heights of MacDonald’s first book. However, it is this book that fully demonstrates the capability of the popular narrative to provide “Imaginative possibilities,” particularly the unexplored story of the single working mother.

In 1950, *Saturday Evening Post* published a serial that condensed the stories in *Anybody Can Do Anything*. MacDonald’s third book portrayed a family of women who were able to create identities outside the role of housewife. This is significant because regardless of employment status, many women of the 1950s identified with that role, willingly or otherwise. 1950s wives

⁹³ MacDonald, *Egg*, 69.

⁹⁴ Cott, *Public Vows*, 190.

⁹⁵ MacDonald, *Egg*, 93.

⁹⁶ Levey, “Imagining the Family,” 127.

were expected to make marriage their career and do their job well. The pressure on postwar brides to reconcile the turmoil of the past few years and create a sense of stability through their marriages was considerable. The responsibility for marital happiness was solely the province of the 1950s housewife. “Head and Master” laws in most states gave husbands authority over their wives. Women who were not legal equals with their husbands could enjoy a narrative that allowed for the joys of motherhood without the stifling presence of a male figure in the household.⁹⁷

Overlooked by scholars, MacDonald’s last book *Onions in the Stew* recounted the story of her remarriage and move to Vashon Island. This book featured MacDonald as a happy housewife who only works outside the home out of necessity, and supports the contention that MacDonald did not rail against the postwar gendered construction of marriage in *The Egg and I*. She embraced this role in the time period covered by *Onions in the Stew*, because this time her partner was supportive and appreciative. Although the isolation is nowhere near that of the chicken ranch, Vashon Island could not be considered urban, a fact that indicates the problem in the previous marriage was not entirely location, but rather choice of husband.

While the majority of American women between the ages of eighteen and fifty were married (72.7%), with only 2.9% divorced, it is impossible to tell through United States Census data how many of the marriages were remarriages.⁹⁸ MacDonald’s last book was able to speak to those women who were finding happiness in second marriages. In 1955, the year MacDonald published *Onions in the Stew*, the median age of brides who were being remarried was 34.5. MacDonald was remarried at thirty-four.⁹⁹ A 1950s sociological study showed that the majority of divorced women remarried and were content in these subsequent marriages.

Betty MacDonald’s narrative of marriage, divorce and remarriage not only encompasses her own generation, but that of her parents’ and grandparents’. It is the story of the changing character of American marriage and its persistent problems. Narrowing the focus through historical contextualization provides a reassessment of MacDonald’s oeuvre. It complicates the picture of MacDonald as a domestic humorist, and it also complicates our view of interwar and postwar marriage in America.

⁹⁷ Betty MacDonald, “And It Happened To Me,” *Saturday Evening Post*, June-September 1950. Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 237. Celesio, *Making Marriage Work*, 76, 75 and 84. Coontz, *Marriage A History*, 238.

⁹⁸ Ruggles, *IPUMS*. 5% are separated or spouse is absent, 3.2% are widowed and 16.3% are never married/single.

⁹⁹ Plateris, “100 Years of Marriage,” 55.

CHAPTER 3

WILDERNESS WIVES AND FRONTIER FOLLIES – HATCHING *THE EGG AND I*

There are some other things that had to do with the book selling a million copies. In the first place, Lippincott brought it out at a wonderful time – everyone was depressed by the war and they wanted to read something light, and that was very lucky for me. Also, the war ended just before the book came out, which was very fortunate, and then right afterwards they took the restrictions off the paper, which helped a great deal. [inaudible] that I think that I’m such a wonderful writer that my next book will also sell a million copies because I know that there were too many things that had to do with God sitting on my shoulder that made this book a great seller.¹⁰⁰

Betty MacDonald’s attitude towards her sudden fame was one of astonished humility, as the above quote indicates. In a reply to a fan named Mrs. Forrest, MacDonald advised Mrs. Forrest to “do your article now as writers are few and far between and it is comparatively easy to have things published – (my family points this out to me daily that this is the only reason my stuff was published.” In that same letter, MacDonald articulated the inspiration that launched her writing career:

The idea in writing the book was to furnish a rebuttal to such books as WE TOOK TO THE WOODS [sic] and LIVING HIGH and WILDERNESS WIFE. I enjoyed the books but got damned tired of hearing the pioneer life pictured as the ideal existence for a woman. I have always maintained that those books were actually written as a justification for the husband’s queer choice of occupations. To me, a woman who says that she prefers to live without lights, water, telephone

¹⁰⁰ MacDonald, Betty. “The Golden Egg: Interview with Betty MacDonald.” Produced by Wolfgang Hampel. Audio CD, copyright 2007.

or friends, is on par with a person who says that he enjoys having athlete's foot.¹⁰¹

An understanding of what MacDonald was refuting with her first and very successful effort as a humorist not only challenges her placement in the domestic humor category, but also provides a basis for analysis of the oft-overlooked theme of rural verses urban, which runs through American humor and is an essential component of *The Egg and I*.



We Took to the Woods, by Louise Dickinson Rich, published in 1942, chronicles her second marriage to Ralph Eugene Rich, a former businessman who had recently eschewed urbanity and had returned to the land – specifically at Forest Lodge on Rapid River in Maine. The book was instantly popular, translated into several languages and even issued to overseas soldiers. It has gone through several reprints and is considered a much cherished if dated classic.¹⁰²

Rich and MacDonald share some similarities: both divorced in 1931 and remarried; both began writing with material gain in mind. When asked what prompted her to begin writing Rich answered “Desperation, I guess” – her son was only eight weeks old when her first story was published. Both of their first books were published by Lippincott and Co. Both were given advances which were quickly spent. *We Took to the Woods* and *The Egg and I* were serialized in *Atlantic Monthly* and were also Book-of-the-Month Club selections. Rich and MacDonald found success in writing children's books, and although MacDonald did not publish as prolifically as Rich, the latter lived forty years longer. Both of their husbands fled urban, white collar employment: Robert Heskett went from insurance salesman to chicken rancher and Ralph Rich left his career as an inventor in Chicago and returned to the site of frequent school outings.¹⁰³ Significant differences can account for the very different take each woman had on life in rural America. Although both found happiness with their second husbands, living without modern conveniences contributed to the strain that ended MacDonald's first marriage, while its appeal

¹⁰¹ Letter. Betty MacDonald to Mrs. Forrest. July 15, 1945. (Folder V.F. 844. Betty Bard MacDonald Papers. University of Washington).

¹⁰² Alice Arlen and Louise Dickinson Rich. *She Took to the Woods: A Biography and Selected Writings of Louise Dickinson Rich*. (Rockport, Me: Down East Books, 2000)77. Arlen wrote *She Took to the Woods* with the consent and cooperation of Louise Dickinson Rich's son and daughter (Bland and Frizter, *Merry Wives*, 22).

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 33,254 (Rich's advance was \$225, MacDonald's \$500), 77, 21.

brought Rich and her second husband together. Louise Dickinson and a group of friends on a canoe trip came upon Ralph his first day back at Forest Lodge – he was in the middle of chopping firewood for the winter. After an evening of discussion the two realized that they both had “comparable senses of humor” as well as “a similar wariness and weariness with the trappings of civilization.” Dickinson roots her initial attraction to what she characterizes as his “enthusiasm and bravery, his freedom” implicit in his decision to reside at Forest Lodge.¹⁰⁴

MacDonald, unlike Rich, did not find her husband already established in rural America; she followed him there. She had married an insurance salesman who, on their honeymoon, announced that he felt destined to be the owner of a chicken ranch. While Rich and her husband were intellectual equals (her husband was a graduate of Harvard), there is a gap in humor and sensitivity that is distinctly felt between the Betty and Bob personae in *The Egg and I*. Rich is not keyed into the terrible sense of isolation that colors *The Egg and I* because she has a “small but constant flow of tourists” and friends. This discontent proved more fertile ground for literary comedy.¹⁰⁵ According to Kercher, “evidence suggests that liberal satire also helped some Americans overcome feelings of isolation.” Isolation is one of the most articulately and beautifully illustrated themes in *The Egg and I*.

June Burn’s book *Living High* was also published by Lippincott, a year before *We Took to the Woods*. She placed an ad in a Washington newspaper which read “WANTED, a cabin mate. Every country inconvenience. Mile walk from Cabin John trolley, through a pine cathedral. Brooks, spring, woods, wild strawberries soon. No bath, no phone, no neighbors in sight.” This ad was answered by thirty women and one man who, one month later, became her husband Farrar Burn. Like Robert Heskett, Burn was a veteran of World War I. Unlike Heskett, Burn believed in working just enough to be able to enjoy nature, and wanted nothing more “than the simple fruits of occasional labor.” Raised by an itinerate Methodist preacher from the south, Burn’s upbringing prepared her for a life of austerity, which Farrar Burn offered her.¹⁰⁶

Both Burn and MacDonald settled on islands in Puget Sound; Burn came to Sentinel Island as a homesteader and MacDonald with her second husband settled on the much larger

¹⁰⁴ Ibid , 29.

¹⁰⁵ Bland and Fritzer, *Merry Wives*, 22.

¹⁰⁶ June Burn, *Living High*, (Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), 3, 7, 6.

Vashon Island.¹⁰⁷ Loneliness never encroached on the Burns, indicated by a chapter of *Living High* titled “A Winter of Wonderful Isolation.”¹⁰⁸ Like Dickinson and MacDonald, Burn embarked on a writing career to generate extra income, which the new homesteaders desperately needed.¹⁰⁹ Farrar Burn was the opposite of Robert Heskett, possessing an “instinct for economy of effort” which some “so patly call laziness.”¹¹⁰ He believed that the “energy-margin, time-margin left over from doing a washing [was] more important than getting the clothes to a certain degree of whiteness.”¹¹¹ Farrar’s attitude is the complete opposite of Heskett’s, whom Betty accused of being “sired by a vacuum cleaner.”

Walker uses the example of Heskett’s requirement that MacDonald keep the floors of their ranch house spotless, “When Betty MacDonald’s narrator complains about her husband’s insistence that she mop the kitchen floor daily, she reveals the tyranny of a system that makes women economically dependent on men,” but does not mention the fact that Heskett had deliberately chosen white pine.¹¹² The only other “type of floor which might possibly get as dirty as white pine, or more quickly, would be one of white velvet,” notes MacDonald. This, along with the fact that, according to her husband, clean floors served as “a badge of fine housekeeping, a labor of love and woman’s duty to her husband” ensured that MacDonald was scrubbing floors daily, a task she “heartily resented.” Heskett demanded that MacDonald fulfill a duty he himself made more difficult. MacDonald unashamedly places the blame on her husband and the institution of the country housewife. “The more I was shown of that side of life of a farmer’s good wife, the more I saw in the life on an old-fashioned mistress. ‘Just don’t let anyone tempt me on a linoleum floor.’”¹¹³

In her letter to Mrs. Forrest, MacDonald states that she sees *We Took to the Woods* and *Living High* and other books belonging to this genre as “justification for the husband’s queer choice of occupation.”¹¹⁴ However, these women were not dragged into the wilderness by their hair, to face a life of repression and forced labor. They were willing partners who chose this life with open eyes when they chose their husbands. By

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, chapter nine.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 57.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 144.

¹¹¹ Burn, *Living High*, 144.

¹¹² Walker, *Very Serious Thing*, 147.

¹¹³ MacDonald, *Egg*, 74-75.

¹¹⁴ MacDonald to Forrest.

broadening the analysis to include what inspired MacDonald to write *Egg*, it is apparent that *The Egg and I* was not a critique of postwar or even rural marriage, but of her own marriage.



MacDonald, in her third autobiographical work, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, credits her sister Mary for the book's impetus. A talent scout for a publishing firm searching for Northwest authors renewed his acquaintance with Mary Bard, who immediately suggested her sister Betty, despite the fact that she had never mentioned to Mary any desire to be an author. . . . Mary used two selling points on her reluctant sister: her absolute belief in what she considered Betty's considerable talent and "great brain," and the fact that "every publisher in the United States [was] simply dying for material about the Northwest."¹¹⁵

It was while she was on her way to meet the talent scout that MacDonald decided she "was going to write a sort of rebuttal to all the recent successful I-love-life books by female good sports whose husbands had forced them to life in the country without lights and running water."¹¹⁶ The publisher's representative requested a 5,000 word outline the next night, prompting MacDonald to ask her best friend at the construction office to cover for her with a feigned illness in order to produce said outline. "She said sure she would, wished me luck, hung up the phone and skidded in and told the boss that I was staying home to write a book and so I was fired and in one day transferred my great talent from construction to writing."¹¹⁷ These two inspirations for *The Egg and I* justify a reassessment of the book that includes genres other than women's domestic humor. The rural and regional setting is the focus of both these motivations, a setting that places *The Egg and I* in a different genre of American literature: frontier humor.

The American frontier proved a fertile site of inspiration for a particular brand of American humor, beginning with the colonial frontier, continuing into the Old Southwest and ending with the American West. *The Egg and I* takes place in what can arguably be labeled the

¹¹⁵ Betty MacDonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, 250.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

last American frontier: the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state. Mary's characterization of the Pacific Northwest indicates mid-century Americans would have seen it as such:

We are living in the last frontier of the United States. The land of the great salmon runs, giant firs, uncharted waters and unscaled mountains and almost nothing has been written about it. If you told the people in New York that salmon leaped in our front doors and snapped at our ankles they'd believe it. Most of the people in the United states either think we're frozen over all the time like the Antarctic or that we're still wearing buckskin and fighting Indians.¹¹⁸

Bland and Fritzer assert that MacDonald's "striking settings are important characters, much as the Mississippi River is a major character in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*."¹¹⁹ Like Mark Twain's narrator in *Roughing It*, Betty offers an urban assessment of the frontier's character, describing it as a "land that resents civilization and it isn't a little futile stick-out-the-tongue kind of resentment, but a great big smashing resentment that is backed by all the forces of nature."¹²⁰

Don Lee Fred Nilsen's study of humor scholarship draws a connection between the two frontiers of the Old Southwest and the "far West," stating that what "best characterizes both American culture and American humor is the single concept of 'frontier spirit.'"¹²¹ The first instance of this unique brand of American humor manifested on the frontier of the Old Southwest. Southwest humor was inspired by the various stages of civilization evolving around them on the Southwest frontier; this same type of setting is evident in the Olympic Peninsula. In *The Egg and I*, MacDonald tapped into the hyperbole of the Southwest humorist when she wrote, "[T]hat country is describable only by superlatives. Most rugged, most westerly, greatest, deepest, largest, wildest, gamiest, richest, most fertile, loneliest, most desolate – they all belong to the coast country."¹²²

¹¹⁸ Betty Macdonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything* (New York: Lippincott, 1950) 220.

¹¹⁹ Fritzer and Bland, *Merry Wives*, 29.

¹²⁰ Betty MacDonald, *The Egg and I*, (New York: Lippincott), 87.

¹²¹ Don Lee Fred Nilsen, *Humor in American Literature: a Selected Annotated Bibliography*, (New York: Garland, 1992) 120.

¹²² MacDonald, *Egg and I*, 40.

MacDonald's Ma and Pa Kettle resemble Johnson J. Hopper's Simon Suggs, particularly in her use of "close attention to detail...and the careful attempt to re-create dialect," a hallmark of Southwestern humor.¹²³ So skillful and humanizing was her portrayal of rural stereotypes that these characters became household names to Americans through the film version and into a television series which aired throughout the 1950s. Her visual portrait of the Kettles, perfect in itself, was enhanced by the carefully-crafted rendering of their speech: "Knowing that they had a good stream, a ram, and a water tower, I asked Mrs. Kettle why they didn't install an inside toilet. She was incensed. "And have every sonofabitch that has to go, traipsin' through my parlor? When we start spendin' money like drunken sailors, it won't be for no lah-de-dah-toilet."¹²⁴

Rather than humorously coping with the patriarchal nature of American marriage, Betty utilizes her wit to contend with an environment that seems determined to keep the civilization she is accustomed to at bay. This type of humor requires a narrator who is not of (from or born into) the frontier, but rather one who is newly acquainted with the frontier. Like Augustus Baldwin Longstreet and Mark Twain, Betty Macdonald had enough urban insight and experience to appreciate and underscore the absurdities of rural America at this very end of the frontier. The American frontier humorist, "although he well could be...never is a tragedian; he nudges his reader towards laughter instead of despair."¹²⁵ MacDonald's book is considered one of the darker and more desolate additions to American domestic humor. Betty's life on the chicken ranch is not only terribly isolated, but at times terrifying. She encounters not only wildcats and bears but an escaped mental patient. In his book *Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "the Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction*, Richard Boyd Hauck argues that "the balancing of a sense of horror by a sense of humor was required to maintain a sense of values in an environment that was full of annihilative energies" like the American frontiers.¹²⁶ MacDonald perfectly articulates the exhausting effect of not only rural life but the constant care of over a thousand chickens. For MacDonald's persona Betty "the humor serves as a survival technique and, as in

¹²³ Richard Boyd Hauck, *Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "the Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 42.

¹²⁴ MacDonald, *Egg and I*, 117.

¹²⁵ Hauck, *Cheerful Nihilism*, 10.

¹²⁶ Hauck, *Cheerful Nihilism*, 43.

much minority humor, a defense against more destructive alternatives such as madness or suicide.”¹²⁷

While some literary scholars disparage what they interpret as MacDonald and other purveyors of the domestic humor genre allowing women to simply laugh off discontent or isolation, the humor could also be interpreted as a healthy, and very American, method of finding the absurd in desperate situations, rather than an outright dismissal of the problem. The difficulties MacDonald encounters are not those of the isolated suburban housewife, but those of the frontier wife, such as a lack of plumbing: “Washtub baths are from the same painful era which housed abdominal operations without anesthetics, sulfur and molasses in the spring, and high infant mortality.”¹²⁸

Other factors complicating a reassessment of MacDonald’s contribution may have been the perception of outmoded racial attitudes in some of her writing, and a difficulty for more recent readers to pinpoint and identify with her views. MacDonald’s negative characterization of the Native Americans she encounters while on the chicken ranch may have dated her in the eyes of scholars, causing those who did encounter her to dismiss her as irrelevant to current studies. MacDonald’s attitudes towards the Western Native American echoes Twain’s in *Roughing It* and reflects not so much a prejudice but a reaction “against the glorification of the noble savage” in both cases.¹²⁹ Twain’s “antitheticism works out to a qualified racism” just as “MacDonald’s unease with them is palpable, resulting in politically incorrect remarks by current standards.”¹³⁰ In the beginning of *The Egg and I*, MacDonald outlines her “romantic notions about Indians” she had developed in her childhood from encounters with Blackfeet Indians and stories told by her grandmother of Hiawatha, Pocahontas and Sitting Bull: “We thought these Indians were simply wonderful, so strong and brave, and would run for blocks to see them” as they traveled through the then-frontier town of Butte, Montana. She describes the dismantling of these “romantic notions” as a “bitter blow” when she “learned” that

Today’s little red brother, or at least the Pacific Coast variety
which I saw, is not a tall copper-colored brave, who, clad only in beads
and feathers and brandishing a bow and arrow, bounds around in the

¹²⁷ Walker and Dresner, *Redressing the Balance*, 101.

¹²⁸ MacDonald, *Egg and I*, 40.

¹²⁹ Bier, *Rise and Fall*, 143.

¹³⁰ Ibid, Bland and Fritzer, *Merry Wives*, 259.

deep woods. Instead, our Indian, squat and mud-colored, was more apt to be found slouched in Model T, a toothpick clenched between his yellow teeth, a drunken leer on his flat face. On the reservation he was orderly and well behaved and, we were told, used to engage in dangerous pursuits like whaling and seal hunting; but in appearance, at any rate, he resembled the story-book variety and my childhood Blackfeet Indian, about as much as mud shark resembles a Beardsley trout.¹³¹

The chapter “With Bow and Arrow” of *The Egg and I* recounts the bulk of Betty’s experience with the Native Americans residing in the area of the chicken ranch. After Betty, in the absence of Bob, pulls a shotgun on Geoduck and Pearl after what she believes is a drunken threat of rape, the Hesketts are invited to a picnic on the beach held by the local Indian community. MacDonald uses the picnic to illustrate her perception of lack of adequate child supervision, rampant alcoholism, overt sexuality even in minors, and abusive attitudes towards women. MacDonald concludes the chapter by stating that “Little red brothers or not, I didn’t like Indians, and the more I saw of them the more I thought what an excellent thing it was to take that beautiful country away from them. They had come a long way from Hiawatha.”¹³² MacDonald’s perspective on Native American residents of the Olympic Peninsula was possibly a reaction to the reverence and awe accorded Native Americans by Rich, Burn and Kathrene Pinkerton, who wrote *Wilderness Wife*. The Burns lived with Eskimos in the Arctic and experienced a peace celebration with Lummi Indians near Washington’s San Juan Islands.¹³³ Pinkerton, whose husband spoke Ojibwa, also interacted with Native Americans in their own villages, and expresses a sympathetic view of her neighbors, going so far as to leave her lipstick on the grave of young girl and, later, castigating a traveler for removing it and other toys left for the child.¹³⁴

Unlike MacDonald, Burn’s and Pinkerton’s encounters with Native Americans were in the context of their culture, on their lands. The Native Americans in *The Egg and I* did not live on reservations; at the picnic that Betty attended “[t]here were no buckskin dresses or feather headdresses, and from a distance it could have been anyone’s picnic.” It is likely that

¹³¹ MacDonald, *Egg and I*, 23.

¹³² MacDonald, *Egg and I*, 220.

¹³³ Burn, *Living High*, 219.

¹³⁴ Pinkerton, *Wilderness Wife*, 45.

MacDonald was encountering members of the Jamestown S’Klallam tribe. During the Indian Reorganization Act period from 1935-1939, the Jamestown S’Klallams opted to stay on the land they had purchased themselves and remain unrecognized by the federal government. Characterized as a “progressive Indian community,” the Jamestown S’Klallams “aggressively integrated into the non-Indian community and its economy.”¹³⁵ This is supported by MacDonald’s *The Egg and I*, which portrays the Native Americans in the area as independent, shrewd businessmen whose economy depended on interactions with non-Indian groups. A problem for audiences in the latter half of the century occurs when MacDonald fails to acknowledge that the “problems” she sees as inherent in the community were imported from and contributed to by a forced interaction with white mainstream America.

Another similarity between the two American humorists is that just as Twain’s “partisanship” towards African Americans “confounds allegations of prejudice,” Betty’s defense of African American and Asian friends/fellow patients at the sanatorium in *The Plague and I* forces a reconsideration of the accepted notion (the perception from *The Egg and I*?) that MacDonald was an inherently prejudiced person.¹³⁶ MacDonald does not shirk from making direct comments about racism, particularly in the workforce and the tuberculosis sanatorium. In *Anybody Can Do Anything*, she criticizes the “horrible practice in American business of seldom hiring any female office worker who does not have white skin and is not under thirty.”¹³⁷ But the majority of MacDonald’s discourse on race takes place in *The Plague and I*.

For example, Betty’s bath partner in the sanatorium, Evalee, is a twenty-seven year old African American mother of two and graduate of the University of Washington who becomes one of Betty’s closest friends. During their first meeting, Evalee explains to Betty that she had taken one of the porch beds as a way of solving “the roommate problem” since “most white people would object to sharing a room with a colored person,” even though the distance between porch beds did not silence all complaints.¹³⁸ Betty’s roommate Eileen declared that she “won’t take a bath with no nigger...niggers stink.” After Betty indignantly and unsuccessfully tries to disabuse Eileen of this notion, Kimi states “In Japan they think white people stink.” Eileen was

¹³⁵ <http://www.washingtontribes.org/default.aspx?ID=48>

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ MacDonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, 140.

¹³⁸ MacDonald, *Plague and I*, 100.

incredulous, “You mean Japs smell different from white people?” Kimi replied, “It is our opinion that we Japanese do not smell at all.”¹³⁹

It would be unrealistic to consider MacDonald a social progressive whose concept of racial equality outstripped that of her contemporaries. Her characterization of Kimi, while it continuously reflects the genuine respect MacDonald had for her, can also be read another way. Statements such as “Kimi’s speeches always sounded as though they should have been on parchment with a spray of cherry blossoms,” and the fact that she chose to render Kimi’s spoken words in dialect (“Cabbage are hahrible medicine!”) could be interpreted by today’s standards as culturally insensitive.¹⁴⁰

Yet another element that resists a neat fit into the domestic humor genre is MacDonald’s use of dark humor. Like *The Egg and I*, the setting in which *The Plague and I* takes place, the institution of the tuberculosis sanatorium, is as much a character as Betty, her fellow patients and the nurses that tend to them. Once again, setting is crucial in determining where the book fits into the canon of American humor. MacDonald uses black humor as a means of articulating and evaluating not only the absurdities within this institution, but also the constant fear of death or incapacity that walked the halls of the Pines and made its presence known with every hemorrhage or unsuccessful operation.

Since the Civil War and Ambrose Bierce’s injection of black humor into American culture, American humorists interweave hilarity with the gruesome, a tradition that was continued by Dorothy Parker in the early twentieth century, and continues to make its presence known in American humor today. In the introduction to his edited work on American black humor, Alan R. Pratt, while acknowledging that a concrete definition is impossible in regards to this particular brand of writing style, notes that “black humor involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses.”¹⁴¹

Kimi’s concept of death (and Betty’s reaction to it) provides one of the book’s best examples of black humor:

¹³⁹Ibid, 101-102.

¹⁴⁰ MacDonald, *The Plague and I*, 93 and 128.

¹⁴¹ Alan R. Pratt, *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Pub, 1993), xix.

To me Death is a lecherous, sly deranged old man. His beard is sparse and stained. His eye are coarse lidded [sic], red rimmed, furtive and evil. His loose red lip are slimy and drooling. He pants with anticipation. His partially opened mouth shows brown shaggy thread of tooth. He shuffles up and down the corridor at night, his malodorous, black robe dragging behind him.¹⁴²

MacDonald included this ghoulish description, then effectively de-fanged it with her observation that “[He] must have done his shuffling in the very early evening, for Kimi closed her eyes on the stroke of nine-thirty and did not open them again until the wash water was delivered.”¹⁴³

Thus there are clear difficulties in reducing MacDonald’s work to the category of domestic humor. Taken as a whole, while family is an essential feature of MacDonald’s writings, the subject of domesticity cannot account for half her subject matter or comedic focus. The ability to assign herself to more than just the role or setting of housewife and home helps her disconnect this oppressive role to self-meaning and worth and explore frustration and negative feelings.



Some scholars credit MacDonald with having inspired Shirley Jackson, Erma Bombeck, and other purveyors of domestic humor, but perhaps the most appropriate inheritor of the MacDonald tradition is the contemporary writer David Sedaris. Sedaris, who was *Time’s* 2001 humorist of the year, has published six books that are mainly comprised of autobiographical sketches. Sedaris and MacDonald devote large sections of their works to humorous childhood memories, and the similarities between the Bards and the Sedaris family are striking. Like MacDonald, Sedaris has three sisters and one brother and considered himself the least talented in his family. Their respective older sisters, Mary and Lisa, are strong-willed and outgoing, and both their fathers were engineers. While Sedaris’ mother’s ambivalence about housework is a stark contrast to Sydney Bard’s

¹⁴² MacDonald, *The Plague and I*, 160.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

staggering domestic competence, both are adored figures who smoke cigarettes constantly, employ an almost shockingly pragmatic outlook, and figure prominently as influences on their children. Both MacDonald and Sedaris lost a parent. One of the most significant similarities is that the lack of conventionality in both families is presented as normal and worthy of respect. Even as they make fun of their families' foibles, the authors convey an undeniable warmth, affection, and acceptance. In a sense, they challenge the very notion of a 'normal' American family.

Regardless of whether or not Sedaris has been directly influenced by MacDonald's work, they belong to the same tradition of American humor. Both are skilled at translating the absurdity of the varied American experience into comedy. Fulfilling the expectation of social historians that humor is a link to the traditionally unobserved American, MacDonald and Sedaris cherish the oddball and ably flesh out for national consumption an astoundingly varied composite of the denizens inhabiting the nooks and crannies of the American population. In the tradition of the American humorist observer, MacDonald's delight in the everyday American is selective. "I like people but not all people. I'm neither Christian enough nor charitable enough to like anybody just because he is alive and breathing. I want people to interest or amuse me. I want them fascinating and witty or so dull as to be different. I want them either intellectually stimulating or wonderfully corny; perfectly charming or hundred per cent stinker. I like my chosen companion to be distinguishable from the undulating masses and I don't care how."¹⁴⁴

It is unquestionable that MacDonald's works are an essential part of the postwar feminist dialogue, and the consideration of them in this context should continue. However, like Sedaris, who is sometimes pigeonholed as a "gay" writer, her talent is too large to be marginalized by a label. The result is that her value as a humorist and as a skilled observer of her time is currently underappreciated. Having examined her in the context of domestic audiences and the canon of American humor, this study now moves into the international arena. Analyzing her influence in this context further validates the need for reassessment of her work.

¹⁴⁴ MacDonald, *Plague and I*, 85.

CHAPTER 4

AN EGG-SHAPED WORLD – BETTY ABROAD

German filmmaker Wolfgang Hampel made a pilgrimage to Seattle in the 1990s with the intention of gathering footage for his documentary on MacDonald, whom he considered an internationally famous author. Hampel and his associates had produced documentaries on Truman Capote and the illustrator Maurice Sendak, but he believed that the Betty MacDonald project was the culmination of their work on American authors. After spending three weeks in the Seattle area, Hampel had compiled enough material for a product he planned to market to German, Czech and Slovak audiences who eagerly awaited more information on one of their favorite American authors. When informed by Cecelia Goodnow, journalist for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* who covered Hampel's pilgrimage, that MacDonald had not reached the same literary heights in her home country, Hampel sighed in exasperation "Ah, you Americans."¹⁴⁵

The least examined aspect of MacDonald's writing is the international attention it received. The value international audiences found, and continue to find, in her adult and children's books, indicates a need to reevaluate these works, which have fallen by the wayside in the country where MacDonald was born, lived, wrote, and died. The aspects of her writing that appeal to these international audiences also connect MacDonald to the broader traditions of American humor.

Hampel was not the only European to make the trip to the Pacific Northwest for glimpses of MacDonald's former residences and setting of her books. In late 2008, a reporter for BBC Radio 4 accompanied History Link staff historian, Paula Decker, to several MacDonald sites. MacDonald's popularity in Great Britain began in the early 1950s when *The Egg and I* first appeared on the British market. Her popularity continued throughout the 1950s in England, so much so that in 1956, Ditchling Press released a publicity pamphlet that characterized MacDonald's books as "phenomenal bestsellers" and, in lieu of the fact that "so many people have written, wanting to learn more about this delightful author . . . this small folder" of biographical information was printed for curious readers. Her death in 1958 of ovarian cancer

¹⁴⁵ Goodnow, "The Egg and Betty."

even warranted an obituary in *The London Times* which included a two paragraph biography of her childhood, two marriages and publishing career.¹⁴⁶

It is not precisely clear how MacDonald reached these international audiences. During and directly after World War II, American publishers joined forces with the United States government to flood international markets with books that counteracted international views that Americans were “without taste . . . barbarians . . . boastful, rash and superficial” and had “far-reaching imperialistic designs.”¹⁴⁷ Whether or not MacDonald was included in the concerted effort is unknown. Yet all of the international editions of MacDonald’s works were released by European, not American (or Overseas Editions, Inc.), publishers. This indicates that international audiences selected Macdonald of their own accord and that her presence abroad is not the result of American propaganda.

The WorldCat search engine provided the basis of information on MacDoanld’s international publications. Using the author’s name as a keyword and filtering the results by language resulted in a list of books currently held in libraries all over the world. For the purposes of this thesis, editions and reissues were differentiated by publisher and/or date. The results of the WorldCat searches are as follows: two editions in Italian (1948 and 1957), three editions in Polish (1949, 1958, 2009), six editions in Dutch (1947-1957), twelve editions in French (1947-1991), fourteen editions in Japanese (1950-2011), nineteen editions in Swedish (1946-2006), and thirty Danish editions (1946-1988).¹⁴⁸ In German, her books have been almost continually in print since 1947 and released by fifteen different publishing houses.¹⁴⁹ However, French, Japanese, German, and Danish are the only languages in which all her works have been published, not just a selection (every language listed includes at least one edition of *The Egg and*

¹⁴⁶ Anonymous. “Betty MacDonald.” Pamphlet (Published by Ditchling Press, Ltd., 1956). Obtained from <http://friendsofbetty-macdonald.org>. Anonymous. “Betty MacDonald Author of ‘The Egg and I’” (obituaries). *The London Times*. Monday, February 10, 1958; pg.14; Issue 54071; col B.

¹⁴⁷ John B. Hench, *Books As Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets in the Era of World War II*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010) 96.

¹⁴⁸ <http://www.worldcat.org.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/> The WorldCat search engine shows only the books that are available in libraries that release their holdings to WorldCat.

¹⁴⁹ Editions were not printed or reissued in the following years: 1961, 1968, 1975, 1990-1999, 2008-2011.

D).¹⁵⁰ It was in Eastern Europe, however, that MacDonald reached the height of her international popularity in the postwar years. Between 1947 and 2010 there have been fifty-one editions of MacDonald's works in Czech and Slovak.¹⁵¹

This chapter begins with an analysis of the popularity of MacDonald's third autobiographical work, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, and its popularity abroad. Because of the high numbers of Czech and Slovak editions, the second section is an in-depth look at her popularity in former Czechoslovakia. The final section examines the reception of *The Plague and I* in postwar Japan. These investigations serve to show that audiences abroad saw a different value in MacDonald's writings; they take her out of the literary domestic humor genre into a global, historical context.



Besides its value as an atypical portrait of a Depression-era family, *Anybody Can Do Anything* is one of the few comic treatments of such a tragic time in American history less than a decade after it ended. It demonstrates a type of resilience, an ability to find something useful and of value in circumstances that are dire and unavoidable. Women in postwar Europe would have found themselves in the same circumstances: running households without a male presence, supporting children and families through whatever job they could obtain and under the same pressure to make the best of the situation. Copies of the book in Danish, Swedish, Dutch, German, French and Italian were all published within five years of its American release in 1950.¹⁵²

Anybody Can Do Anything does not fit within the confines of the domestic humor genre. Like *The Egg and I* and *The Plague and I* it is a chronicle of survival. Although it was serialized under the title "And It Happened To Me" in *The Saturday Evening Post* the same year that it was released, it sold less copies than her other three autobiographical works.¹⁵³ It is possible that in the abundance of the post-World War II American economy, readers were less inclined to want to remember, however humorously, the tribulations of two decades ago. Perhaps the humorous

¹⁵⁰ A complete list of Betty MacDonald's works include: *The Egg and I* (1945), *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* (1947), *The Plague and I* (1948), *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's Magic* (1949), *Anybody Can Do Anything* (1950), *Nancy and Plum* (1952), *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's Farm* (1954), *Onions in the Stew* (1955), *Hello, Mrs. Piggle Wiggle* (1957).

¹⁵¹ <http://www.worldcat.org.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/>

¹⁵² <http://www.worldcat.org.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/>

¹⁵³ Betty MacDonald, "And It Happened to Me." *Saturday Evening Post*, June-August 1950. Goodnow, "Betty and the Egg."

tone of the book itself was offensive to those who did not fare as well as the Bard household did. The prevailing theme is that when the Bards were poor, they enjoyed themselves the most. At the time, Betty noticed that “[their] ability to enjoy [them]selves in the face of complete adversity was astounding to people who believed that you had to have money to have fun; appalling to those others who believed that it was an effrontery for the poor to laugh.”¹⁵⁴ While this ability may have been undervalued by American audiences, then and today, it was appreciated by several generations of international readers.

Besides *The Egg and I* and her children’s series, *Anybody Can Do Anything* had more re-issues than her other autobiographical works abroad. Readers living in countries like Great Britain, who were still undergoing rationing and austerity measures, whose populations were residing in mostly urban areas, were more likely to identify with adjusting to “washing work clothes in gasoline and dishes by candlelight” than the average American reader in the middle of the postwar boom.¹⁵⁵



Her American fans created the “Friends of Betty MacDonald” website, a forum for her ardent admirers. In 2001, a Czech fan submitted to the website a letter praising MacDonald’s works and explaining her popularity for both Czech and Slovak readers. The letter/post mentioned the Czech’s deep love of literature and appreciation of MacDonald’s writing skills as well as her “unpretentiousness and sincerity.”¹⁵⁶ Rather than focus on her considerable talents as a humorist, the letter/post instead praised MacDonald’s ability to overcome daunting obstacles without despair.

At the end of World War II, Czechoslovakians began a “lively effort to catch up with the newer trends from Western Europe and America after the six-year hiatus.”¹⁵⁷ 1947 was a prosperous one for Czechoslovakia, following the peaceful free-elections of 1946. Foreign trade

¹⁵⁴ MacDonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, 128.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁵⁶ Dusan Hutla, “Betty Inspired Czechs,” Translated by Zora Nedoma, “Friends of Betty MacDonald” website. <http://bettyMacDonald.net/721286801.html>, 2001.

¹⁵⁷ Arne Novák and William Edward Harkins, *Czech Literature*, (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976): 333.

soared, particularly that with Western nations.¹⁵⁸ Czechoslovakian communist's moderate position aided this flood of Western material and allowed for the entry of popular American authors.

Her soaring popularity easily classifies her as one of the “newer trends” in American books. Czech publisher Vladimir Zikes, based in Prague, published a Czech version under the name Betty MacDonaldova (titled *Vajce a ja*) at the height of its popularity in America. The following year the same publisher published a Spanish translation (*El huevo y yo*). However, this influx of Western literature ended with the communist takeover in 1948. MacDonald's works would not be reprinted again until twenty-two years later.

After 1970, MacDonald's publications in Czech take a unique form. *The Egg and I* (*Vejde a já*) was published separately, as it was (and is) in America. Czech publications, until 2008, compiled MacDonald's last three autobiographical books *The Plague and I* (1948), *Anybody Can Do Anything* (1950), and *Onions in the Stew* (1955) into one book titled *All That Life Has Given (and Taken)* (*Co život dal (a vzal)*).

From 1990 to the present, MacDonald's works have been continually in print. Two years is the lengthiest time between new Czech or Slovak edition and 2008 saw the release of MacDonald's last three autobiographical books in their original American versions. Instead of a collection that combined all three - *Co život dal (a vzal)* (All That Life Has Given (and Taken)) – the books were published separately under titles unfamiliar to the Czech public: *Kdokoli muze delat cokoli* (Anybody Can Do Anything, 2008), *Morová rána* (The Plague Wound, 2008) and *Dusím se ve vlastní stave* (I'm Stewing in my own Juices, 2008).¹⁵⁹

Czech culture places a high premium on literature. Surveys conducted in the 1960s indicate that one third of the adult Czech population spent at least three hours a week reading books.¹⁶⁰ The Czechs have won numerous international awards for book design, and since the late nineteenth century have developed a “sophisticated translation and editorial culture.”¹⁶¹ Czech authors were (and still are) considered national heroes.¹⁶² It is not surprising that

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Rothschild and Nancy M. Wingfield. *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000: 74.

¹⁵⁹ Respectively *Anybody Can Do Anything*, *The Plague and I*, and *Onions in the Stew*. Translated by Ondrej Pazdirek.

¹⁶⁰ Jiriina Smejkalová, “Censors and Their Readers: Selling, Silence and Reading Czech Books,” *Libraries and the Cultural Record*, Vol. 36 (Winter 2001): 87.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

American literary giants, such as Mark Twain, had multiple editions of their works published in both Czech and Slovak. This does not explain the popularity of such an “unliterary” author as MacDonald.

Gender offers a possible explanation. The Czech Cultural Revival of the nineteenth century was the beginning of the great, Czech literary tradition and “women writers were among the pioneers of the infant Czech literature, and their works became classics, widely read and generally admired” including Božena Němcová (1820-1862). Her 1855 novel *Babička* (Grandmother) “is still arguably the most revered book written in the Czech language.”¹⁶³ Women have been a substantial part of Czech literature since *Babička* was released. Although separated by nearly a century, MacDonald and Němcová’s lives are similar, particularly in family structure. Both Němcová and MacDonald were raised in multigenerational households, something that informs the authors’ subject matter. Although she did not die in poverty like Němcová, both left their husbands and struggled to raise their children on their own. Both *Babička* and *The Egg and I* are located in rural settings, and the writing, while it echoes the simplicity and naturalness of the location and its occupants, is skilled enough to “clearly show that...the rural folk is the subject matter rather than the creator.”¹⁶⁴ Both authors offered “affectionate sketches of figures from the common people” in their early and most popular works.¹⁶⁵ The “healthy folk naturalness” of Němcová’s writing and its appeal to Czech readers explains the emphasis on MacDonald’s lack of pretention and simplicity on the Czech book covers.¹⁶⁶ The popularity of the Ma and Pa Kettle characters, who MacDonald introduced to the American public through *The Egg and I*, are a direct result of MacDonald’s skill at rendering three-dimensional comic characters. Although distinctly more two dimensional in the film and television versions, MacDonald’s Ma and Pa Kettle are sympathized with and frankly admired, much like the rural residents in *Babička*.

Publishing a generation after Němcová, Karolína Světlá is considered one of the first modern Czech women. Although a purely fiction writer, there are commonalities between her style of writing and that of MacDonald. Světlá’s “dominant pathos” was “balanced by fresh,

¹⁶³ Marianne A. Ferber and Phyllis Hutton Raabe, “Women in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Czech Style,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Toward Gender Equity: Policies and Strategies (Spring, 2003): 410. Translator Ondrej Pazdirek, in the course of translating MacDonald’s books, suggested connection between her and Němcová.

¹⁶⁴ Novák, *Czech Literature*, 17.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 164.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

realistic insights and cheerful humor,” as well as her “lively sense for uniqueness of character.” Her work was characterized by “alternating scenes of tragedy and steadfast cheerfulness.” Despite the consistent comedy in *The Egg and I*, MacDonald’s tone is darker than other post-World War II American domestic humor books. Betty’s isolation, her empty marriage and the backbreaking labor on the chicken ranch form an undercurrent of pathos that creates a counterbalance to her determined humor. Czech women authors were especially adept at this balancing act. While Czech readers admired MacDonald for her “personable humor” and ability to face a daunting daily grind, there is a melancholy throughout *The Egg and I* which, coupled with the knowledge of her eventual divorce, makes it the most poignant of MacDonald’s autobiographical works.¹⁶⁷

The interwar period “accorded a leading position to women storytellers” at the head of which was Růžena Svobodová. Svobodová’s early works were sentimental (and at times bitingly sarcastic) portraits of women who had lost their illusions, usually culminating in the main character’s flight. The first chapter of *The Egg and I* begins by outlining Betty’s mother’s ideology of marriage that dictates that a woman’s “bounden duty” is to make her husband happy in whatever profession he chooses. This ideology is severely tested throughout Betty’s narrative of life on isolated chicken ranch on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington. One of the dominant themes throughout the book is Betty’s disappointment, caused by her marriage’s inability to fulfill the promises of her parents’ marriage.

The reasons for MacDonald’s over two decade hiatus in Czechoslovakian publications are indeterminate. In general, book publications hit a low point between 1948 and 1950 due to the socialization of the book publishing process. It took until 1970 for book publications numbers to reach what they were in 1948.¹⁶⁸ This interim period witnessed a new development in the character of Czechoslovakian communist censorship.

After the takeover of the Communist Party in 1948, censorship was responsible for not only upholding communist ideology in literature but also limiting “the spread of the ‘low’ literary culture in the name of promoting a vision of a national ‘high quality,’” a “basic strategy dominated book production until 1989.”¹⁶⁹ It is not surprising, given the cultural/historical value Czechoslovakians invested in literature, that this censorship tool was developed. After the

¹⁶⁷ Hutla letter.

¹⁶⁸ Smejkalová, “Censors,” 94.

¹⁶⁹ Smejkalová, “Censors,” 93.

events of Prague Spring, censorship of Western authors increased. It is plausible that this uniquely Czechoslovakian censorship ideology aided in the censure of American authors. Why was MacDonald popular after heavier control of literature than before? One explanation is that the books cannot easily be construed as vehicles for capitalistic ideals. While her family was educated, it was not bourgeois. This, combined with MacDonald's lack of emphasis on religion, helped make MacDonald's works palatable to communist ideological censors. But how is it possible for an American author to pass the ideological rigors of communist censorship, yet still appeal to the demands of avid and literate Czechoslovakian readers? A review of literary trends that straddle the events of Prague Spring helps place MacDonald's appeal in context.

During communist rule in Czechoslovakia, Czech fiction writers began producing works that inverted or parodied the "socialist realist novel to produce irony or satire."¹⁷⁰ In her book *Anybody Can Do Anything*, Betty outlines her motivations for writing *The Egg and I*, citing the then recent trend of back-to-nature autobiographical works: "I would give the other side of it. I would give the bad sport's account of life in the wilderness without lights, water or friends and with chickens, Indians and moonshine."¹⁷¹ Two covers, one in Czech (1972) and one in Slovak (1998) praise MacDonald's use of irony (the Czech edition mentioned "self-irony" as well). Ludvík Vaculík's *Sekyra* (The Axe, 1966) implies that the "'correct' application of the Party line leads to results which contradict the very ethical premises on which it claims to be based" which culminates with the hero "on the verge of opting out of the system entirely."¹⁷² Like the main characters in these novels, Betty is struggling with a set of systems that do not produce what they promise: marriage, gender roles, and rural America. *The Egg and I* ends on a resigned note; a 1989 Slovak edition of *The Egg and I*, which it sells as a companion piece to the collection of her other three works, mentions Betty's departure from her chicken ranch and her husband, indicating that readers were aware of and accepted MacDonald's decision to "opt out."¹⁷³ A year following the re-release of *The Egg and I* after an over-two-decade absence, Josef Škvorecký published the comic novel *Tankový prapor* (The Tank Battalion, 1971). Although not published in Czechoslovakia, the novel and its humorous rendering of life in the Czechoslovakian army enjoyed a large underground circulation in the Czech military for two

¹⁷⁰ William Edward Harkins, and Paul I. Trensky, *Czech Literature Since 1956: A Symposium*, (New York: Bohemica, 1980): 5.

¹⁷¹ Betty MacDonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, (New York: Lippincott, 1950) 252.

¹⁷² Harkins, *Czech Literature Since 1956*, 6.

¹⁷³ MacDonaldová, Betty *Vajce a já.*, translated by Bohuslav Kompis (Bratislava: Mladé Letá, 1989).

decades.¹⁷⁴ Book covers in both Czech and Slovak commend MacDonald's use of humor to evaluate and relieve despair-laden situations. MacDonald's books about the difficulties and deprivations of rural living and Depression-era urban life could have acted as a civilian complement to Škvorecký's work.

After the events of Prague Spring, the Czechoslovakian government began a process of "normalization" which attempted to "'normalize' the cultural and political residue of the 1968 'pathologies.'"¹⁷⁵ One of the key areas of control was book publication and sales. The ideological department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia required that all publishers submit yearly editorial plans. American authors were the objects of special scrutiny and "the publication of every single American book had to be okayed by a special review that addressed the ideological aspects of the work in question, sometimes two years before the book reached the shelves."¹⁷⁶ Czechoslovakians clamored for these new books, so much so that "book Thursdays" (the day that booksellers released new books weekly) guaranteed long lines outside of bookstores.¹⁷⁷

It is not surprising that the publishing house Odeon is responsible for the re-introduction of MacDonald's work to Czechoslovakia. Using the original translation of Leopold Havlík, the Prague based publishing company released *Vejce a já* (*The Egg and I*) in 1970. In his analysis of John Steinbeck's influence in communist Czechoslovakia, Petr Kopecký credits Odeon as the most prolific publishing house for "introducing quality American literature" directly after Prague Spring.¹⁷⁸

In 1972, Prace Publishing Company released *Co život dal (a vzal)* (*All That Life Has Given (and Taken)*). Advertised as a companion piece to *The Egg and I*, the book was a combination of MacDonald's last adult autobiographical works. Chapter sixteen of *Anybody Can Do Anything* ("Hand me that Straightjacket, Joe – The Government") begins "One of the first things I learned and loved about the Government was that I wasn't the only bonehead working for it."¹⁷⁹ After her first day of work, MacDonald sits down with her mother, siblings and neighbors to discuss her new job. While Czechoslovakian censors were happy to let pass

¹⁷⁴Harkins, *Czech Literature Since 1956*, 8.

¹⁷⁵Smejkalová, "Censors,"89.

¹⁷⁶Petr. Kopecký, "The Story of John Steinbeck in Communist Czechoslovakia," *Steinbeck Studies*, vol. 16 (Spring 2005): 82.

¹⁷⁷Smejkalová, "Censors,"97.

¹⁷⁸ Kopecký "Steinbeck in Communist Czechoslovakia,"82.

¹⁷⁹ MacDonald, *Anybody*, 221.

disparaging remarks on capitalism – “He says [Standard Oil] is responsible for all the wars and that we are all just slaves being allowed to exist until the time comes when we can go into the trenches to protect Standard Oil” – any mention of communism is omitted including: “Allison said, ‘Lorene says that when the Communists take over everything she is going to have an ice skating costume and white figure skates that cost twenty-three dollars.’ Mary said, ‘You tell Lorene that when the Communists take over all she’ll get will be a job in a factory, cabbage soup and a book on birth control.’”¹⁸⁰

This translation by Eva Marxová was used until 2008. It is unknown whether the editions produced after 1989 contained the same omissions. The 2008 editions of MacDonald’s last three autobiographical works (which separated the previous collection into their original separate titles) were also translated by Eva Marxová. Whether these new editions contain the omission of Marxová’s previous translations is also unknown.

MacDonald still inspires “extraordinary attention and fondness for her works” into the twenty first century.¹⁸¹ In 2000, Blanche Caffiere, a lifelong friend of Betty MacDonald, published a Czech version of her book *Much Laughter, a Few Tears: Memoirs of One Woman’s Friendship with Betty MacDonald and her Family*. The publication “took then 94-year-old Blanche to Prague where she was feted, interviewed on television, and swarmed by autograph seekers.”¹⁸²



MacDonald’s popularity in Japan reveals aspects of her writing that should be of great interest to historians of postwar Japan as well as Japanese/American relations in the wake of World War II. This analysis focuses on the character Kimi in *The Plague and I* (real-life Monica Sone), as a way of showcasing MacDonald’s view of Japanese-Americans, which audiences in Japan might have taken as general American view. It is unsurprising that this book was the first of MacDonald’s works published in Japan. From 1935 until 1950, tuberculosis was the number

¹⁸⁰ Betty MacDonalldová, *Mary a já*. (Bratislava : Mladé letá, 1989. Slovak). Betty MacDonald, *Anybody Can Do Anything* (New York: Lippincott. 1950), 200-2002

¹⁸¹ Betty MacDonalldová, *Vejde a já*, translated by Eva Marxová (Praha: Vysehrad, 1991): book cover.

¹⁸² Paula Decker, “Blanche Caffiere: An Appreciation.” History Link website. http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8060, 2006.

one cause of mortality in Japan for almost every year.¹⁸³ Japan's Tuberculosis Prevention Law stated that cities with populations exceeding sixty thousand were required to build sanatoriums to house tubercular patients.¹⁸⁴ In the years between 1945 and 1952 the cultural perception of the disease changed. Previously considered an incurable illness that carried an inescapable social stigma, the "exigencies of war...caused most health bureaucrats, physicians, and government leaders to understand the disease in similar scientific terms, so the development of an effective medicinal cure for it caused most laypersons to do the same."¹⁸⁵ *The Plague and I* not only humanizes the tubercular patient, but maps out Betty's understanding of her disease, as conveyed to her through institutional literature. Most significantly, it dispels myths about tuberculosis' incurability.

One of the main characters in *The Plague and I* is Kimi, Betty's eighteen-year-old Japanese-American roommate. Betty considers Kimi her closest friend in the sanatorium, admitting that "Kimi was twelve years younger than I, but rooming with her taught me that intellectually we were equals, emotionally she was my superior in experience only."¹⁸⁶ Kimi refuted Betty's assessment of Kimi's superiority by acknowledging "that she was Japanese and used to obeying without question."¹⁸⁷ She attributed her contraction of tuberculosis to "the high mark" – the fact that she was expected to earn excellent grades in both her American high school and a Japanese school she attended afterwards: "I ended up with two diploma, two honor pin and tuberculosis."¹⁸⁸

Kimi's acerbic wit and assessment of life in the sanatorium provides a significant amount of the book's best humor. She is able to articulate darker feelings without becoming morbid, and to convey heartwarming sentiments without becoming maudlin. When one of Betty and Kimi's roommates reported their afterhours and forbidden conversations "Kimi said in a voice as gentle as breath, 'In Japan, I believe it is customary to pour boiling oil over the tongue and down the throat of the betrayer.'"¹⁸⁹ When asked how she coped so well with enforced immobility of the

¹⁸³ William Johnston. *The Modern Epidemic: A History of Tuberculosis in Japan*, (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1995): 95.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 266.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 292.

¹⁸⁶ Betty MacDonald, *The Plague and I*, (New York: Lippincott, 1948), 144.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 104.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 111.

first thirty days on complete bed-rest she “said in her gentle way ‘It is not difficult. In my mind, I am torturing the nurses.’”¹⁹⁰

One of Kimi’s observations indicates that *The Plague and I* is as useful a tool for the analysis of gender as *The Egg and I*:

It has been my observation that, in all things in life, the man is favored. Here at The Pines, in the Men’s Bedrest Hospital, which is one floor below this, a man may read all the daily paper from the day he enters...it is because the Medical Director is also a man. He thinks, “the woman’s mind is little. She can lie twenty-four hour a day for thirty day, a total of seven hundred and twenty hour, doing nothing. The man’s mind is big. He must give it something to think about. I will let him read the paper immediately.”¹⁹¹

Following this statement, a fellow patient inquires how a seventeen year old was so smart. Kimi replied, “I have not been popular...[t]he Japanese are a race of small people. I am tall. I used to go to parties but I would spend the evening sitting alone on the couch. Like a giant Buddha I smiled and smiled as I watched the antics of the little people.”¹⁹² Kimi discussed problems that were unique to Japanese culture and would have translated to Japanese audiences in America and Japan.

The Plague and I, released two years after the last internment camp was closed and during the American occupation of Japan, offered Japanese readers a positive example of Japanese/American relationships. Although the action in the book takes place before Pearl Harbor, it portrays a pervasive, negative perception of Asian-Americans. When Betty is transferred from a four-bed room to a double, the Charge Nurse informs her that she will be rooming with “Miss Sanbo (Kimi)...if you don’t mind.” Betty was delighted, the Charge Nurse surprised. “Some people would object to sharing a room with an Oriental.” Betty replied that she would prefer it.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 124.

¹⁹¹ MacDonald, *The Plague and I*, 66.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 130.

After their successful recoveries, Betty MacDonald and Monica Sone (Kimi's real identity) remained good friends until the former's death. When Sone was sent to an internment camp in Idaho, MacDonald was outraged.¹⁹⁴ She insisted they keep up a detailed correspondence, which MacDonald saved and later showed to an editor at *Atlantic Monthly*. He approached Sone and asked her if she would be interested in writing a book on her experiences. The result was *Nisei Daughter*, first published by Little, Brown and Company in 1953 and later reissued by the University of Washington Press in 1979,

In *Nisei Daughter*, Sone refers to MacDonald as "Chris" and describes her as a woman with "fluff of copper hair" who "laughed easily and her crisp humor took the drabness out of our routine life. I tried to analyze Chris. I couldn't understand how she could be so gay!"¹⁹⁵ She describes the aforementioned room reassignment with more detail:

One morning Chris was moved out of the four-bed ward into a two-bed cubicle. A few minutes later the nurse wheeled a chair up to my bed. 'Miss Itoi, would you like to move in with Miss Young?' she asked. For a moment I lay there stupefied. I had expected Hope or Wanda to be moved in with Chris. Then I told the nurse I would like it very much. Chris beamed at me when I was settled in the new room. 'I hope you don't mind my company, Kazi. The nurse was amazed when I asked for you, but I want companionship, and not the pale version of Miss Sanitarium or Agate Eyes.' I could only say, 'I'm glad,' but I felt something significant had happened. Chris had reminded me of my Japanese ancestry, but with a comforting difference. Somehow she made me feel proud of it. I was determined to be unobtrusive, not to intrude upon Chris's sense of privacy beyond routine conversation, but it was like trying to ignore a roomful of fireworks. I could not remain untouched by her brilliant humor and her irresistible zest for living. I felt as if I were being lured into bright sunlight, inch by inch, from the pit of self-pity into which I had sunk. Every morning Chris burst through my

¹⁹⁴ Goodnow, "Egg and Betty." When a Japanese professor and his wife offered to let the newly married Betty and Don MacDonald live in their apartment because they were being sent to an internment camp, the MacDonald's thanked them profusely (due to the war there was a shortage of rental options) but Betty "felt like grave snatchers." Betty MacDonald, *Onions in the Stew* (New York: Lippincott, 1955): 18.

¹⁹⁵ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 138.

groggy sleep in Japanese with an ‘*Ohayo gozai masu*’ and warned me that the head nurse was on the warpath again.¹⁹⁶

MacDonald’s admiration of and preference for what Sone considers her Japanese ancestry informed Japanese and Japanese-American readers that the sublimation of nationality was not a necessary component of successful friendships with Americans. No where is this more apparent than in Sone’s comments on her feelings surrounding the end of her sojourn at “the Pines.” When Monica, about to leave the sanatorium with a “dark past history of tuberculosis” and twenty-five extra pounds, wept to “Chris” and other companions “carried away by the pathos of it all.” She “expected to be engulfed with the gentle sympathetic murmurs which I used to receive from my friends back home. Instead they shrieked with laughter and jollied me about my girth...when I saw them looking at me with warm affection, I suddenly felt comforted. Chris...and my other companions had accepted me into their circle as I was. They did not care that I looked different, said or did a few odd things, because basically we liked each other. For the first time in my life I felt sheer happiness in being myself.”¹⁹⁷

However, “Chris” drew attention to Monica’s Japanese ancestry inadvertently as well. When she, Monica and a friend invited a fellow patient new to the ambulatory hospital to join them at their dining table, “Chris” questioned “Kazi” about her silence, which “Chris” mistook for dislike. An encounter weeks later with two other Nisei girls who, according to “a Japanese point of view...behaved in the utmost decorum becoming to modest maidens.” She “decided to give up trying to be the most polite person in the sanitarium.”¹⁹⁸ The Japanese civility of allowing others to precede one when leaving or entering a room resulted in Monica’s position at the end of queue. However, *The Plague and I* never draws the readers’ attention to Kimi’s difficulties on integrating into that society and, instead, focuses on her wit, maturity and well-established position of Betty’s best friend.¹⁹⁹

Wolfgang Hampel’s assessment of MacDonald’s significance contrasts with the comments of an American author, David Guterson (like MacDonald, Seattle-based), who toured Germany to promote his internationally best-selling book *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 142.

¹⁹⁷ Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 143.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 142.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

Guterson was stunned by the fact that during an interview, Hampel placed him on the same literary level as MacDonald. Later, in an article, Guterson stated that “MacDonald is not taken seriously in the literary sense at all,” and saw her international popularity as an indication of the “cultural gap” between Germany and America.²⁰⁰ Jack Benner, an associate professor of English at the University of Washington (and Guterson’s former teacher) said that her work is never taught at the university level.²⁰¹ Pace Guterson, who claims that *Nisei Daughter* is one of the inspirations for his novel *Snow Falling on Cedars*, the question must arise whether the failure to acknowledge MacDonald’s significance is due to the stigma of misapplied and inappropriate labels.²⁰² Her international popularity has shown that she is worth taking seriously in both a literary and globally historic sense. Having expanded the analysis of Betty MacDonald to include outside audiences, this study now turns to the translation of *The Egg and I* not into another language but another media: film. Like international audiences’ reception of her works, the Hollywood version of *The Egg and I* highlights aspects of MacDonald’s writing that have gone unrecognized in previous analyses.

²⁰⁰ Goodnow, “Egg and Betty.”

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

THE GOLDEN EGG AND THE SILVER SCREEN

After nineteen days, four hours and thirty-two minutes, master of the publicity stunt James S. Moran successfully hatched an ostrich egg in an effort to promote International Pictures acquisition of the movie rights to Betty MacDonald's *The Egg and I*.²⁰³ The publicity stunt is a small indication of the public anticipation engendered by this cinematic translation of her best-seller. No one has analyzed the film version of MacDonald's *The Egg and I*, which is surprising given its popularity and the critical significance of cinema in the American cultural landscape. A comparison between the film and book illustrates the many layers of mass culture and the infinite contemporary interpretations.

Comparing the book *The Egg and I* by Betty MacDonald (1945) to the film *The Egg and I* is, essentially, a comparison of two cultural texts, the first by a woman and the other by a man. Feminist theory in both literary and film criticism answers questions about how the social construction gender operates within cultural texts. Although literary criticism is often used in the analysis of film, the past four decades of feminist scholarship have produced theoretical frameworks that are applicable only to the medium of film. An examination of the transformations made to the book *The Egg and I* as it was adapted for film must be based upon an analysis of the film that is grounded in feminist film theory, which specifically addresses films produced by men about women.²⁰⁴

Feminist film theory usually begins with Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey uses the Freudian concepts of voyeurism, fetishism and scopophilia - the act of "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze."²⁰⁵ Mulvey appropriates psychoanalytic theory, a trend that will continue in feminist film theory, to establish the concept of the male gaze in film, one that forces the spectator into the masculine, protagonist's position. Since *The Egg and I* is a book written by a female author that was adapted, directed, and produced for the screen by a male, the differences between the two texts can be explained by the imposition of the male gaze upon an originally female perspective.

²⁰³ Douglas Martin, "James S. Moran Dies at 91: Master of the Publicity Stunt," *New York Times* (1923-Current file); Oct 24, 1999, pg. 45; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009).

²⁰⁴ *The Egg and I*, (VHS. Directed by Chester Erskine. Universal City, Calif.: MCA Universal Home Video, 1994).

²⁰⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, (Autumn, 1975), 8.

Mary Anne Doane's "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address" adds another layer of analysis to Mulvey's critical theory of Classical Hollywood Cinema (1930-1960) by including the intended audience, specifically women in 1940s America.²⁰⁶ How can a film for an intended female audience and narrated by a female protagonist show evidence of the all-pervasive male gaze of mid-century American film? Using both Mulvey and Doane's concept that the female spectator ascribes to and supports the imposition of the male gaze to analyze the film adaptation of *The Egg and I* is one possible answer.

Something that is missed, or disregarded, in a psychoanalytic reading of a film is historical context. One of the strongest critiques of Mulvey's feminist film theory is Noel Carroll's "The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm." Carroll argues that Mulvey's methodology is not epistemically sound. Moreover, the theory of active/male gaze of passive/female object "ill-suits the male half of the formula," a recurring problem between feminist and gender theorists.²⁰⁷ Since *The Egg and I* can be considered a vehicle for both Claudette Colbert and Fred MacMurray, an analysis that includes Carroll's theory of the recurring image of women in film allows for a focus that includes the Hollywood crafted images of both the female and male stars. This type of analysis, unlike Mulvey or Doane's, requires historical contextualization.

The Egg and I film is part of a long-standing Hollywood tradition of male directors, writers and producers adapting a female author's work to the mainstream screen. B.T. Lupack argues in *Vision/re-vision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film* (1996) that the feminist message of the original works was invariably whitewashed by its patriarchal adaptation into film.²⁰⁸ The book and film versions of Betty MacDonald's bestseller *The Egg and I* differ not only in tone but also in focus. While the autobiographical book centers around the isolation, labor and inconvenience of running a chicken ranch on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, the film version focuses on the couple's relationship. Although MacDonald's book is

²⁰⁶ Mary Anne Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," in *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984) 67-80.

²⁰⁷ Noel Carroll, "The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48(4), 1990, 353.

²⁰⁸ B.T. Lupack, *Vision/Re-Vision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996).

about her four-year marriage (1927-1931) to Robert Heskett, the relationship gradually crumbles in the background while MacDonald's witty observations and slapstick humor are at the forefront. Writer/director/producer Charles Erskine wrote and reworked the following elements to shift the focus to the marriage (or rather a marriage).

One of the obvious changes to *The Egg and I* in its transition from book to film is the insertion of the character Miss Harriet Putnam (played by Louise Albritton). Betty and Harriet and, implicitly, the audience are aware of Harriet's "designs" on Betty's husband, made apparent through the double entendres that the women fling at each other over Bob's oblivious head (played by Fred MacMurray). "That barnyard glamour girl is making a trap for you and you're just goofy enough to fall into it," the character Betty says in exasperation. The director/writer Erskine pushes this theme of the bumbling male falling into the arms of another woman unawares. Betty wonders aloud if Harriet is capable of taking Bob away from her to which Bob replies, "Don't be an idiot!" "Well, it's happened you know. Men have no sense when it comes to women – truly babes in arms!" Infidelity was a non-issue in MacDonald's book. None of the women surrounding Bob and Betty in the book could be called even a facsimile of Harriet – the self-proclaimed "lady farmer" was non-existent.

Harriet Putnam's farm is a model of modern efficiency, something that Bob, in the film, disproves of, referring to her farm, as a "hobby" while his is a "cause." In MacDonald's version, the Heskett chicken ranch was the only one based on modern, scientific techniques. Bob is continually painted as a man with high ideals and grand visions, which began with his realization in an Okinawa foxhole that his job in customer service was meaningless. Heskett was an insurance salesman when he married MacDonald, then Elizabeth Campbell Bard. He was also a veteran (but of World War I, not World War II), but it was his previous experience on a chicken ranch before the war that inspired his career change. In the film, Bob is one of the main vehicles for the slapstick comedic elements, a bumbling misguided fool who, in one example, confidently fells a tree that lands on the chicken coop, despite Betty's advice. Heskett has none of the ideology that Bob continually spouts throughout the film. A mountain of competence, Heskett serves as a foil for MacDonald's inability to adjust to life on the chicken-ranch.

By the time the film was released, fans of Betty MacDonald and *The Egg and I*, were aware of her divorce from the husband in her first book and her remarriage to Donald

MacDonald, which had taken place five years earlier. The film version ends with Betty returning, after months of estrangement from her husband, with her surprise baby, Anne; in reality, after four years of marriage, MacDonald abruptly left the farm with her two children under three years of age in tow to live with her mother and three sisters in Depression-era Seattle.

Towards the conclusion of *The Egg and I*, MacDonald has a frightening encounter with an insane woman trying to enter her house. As MacDonald relates the story to her husband she states: "I didn't even try to convey my terror because I knew by then that Bob and I were poles apart as far as emotions were concerned."²⁰⁹ With only three pages left, this comment aptly summarizes the state of their marriage. Betty's encounter with a crazy woman in the film ends with her being told that Emily, who speaks to her non-existent husband and mentions a man-high chicken named Charlotte, lost her mind years ago when her husband left her for another woman. This theme of female insanity runs throughout the film, including the introduction, when Betty scolds a porter for carelessly dropping an egg and demanding to know if he realized this egg had a mother and a father and a great deal of assistance. Betty's eventual flight from her husband is preceded by manic soliloquy that enumerates problems that do not necessarily explain why the character paints in foot high letters on the wall "I'm through!"

In the book, it is clearly the never-ending labor of chicken farming and the disparate personalities of Heskett and MacDonald that create the tension and distance in their marriage. Fairly early in the book, MacDonald is sitting "at the kitchen table industriously making" entries into their logbook when her husband unexpectedly kissed the back of her neck. Surprised and confused "as though an old boss had chosen that means of rewarding [her] for a nice typing job" MacDonald remarks to her husband that in "another year or two [they] probably won't even use first names."²¹⁰ It seems Erskine wanted to place the onus of responsibility for rockiness in their marriage not on the husband's choice of profession (a clear critique of men and the male role of breadwinner) but on another woman.

²⁰⁹ MacDonald, *The Egg and I*, 283.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

Carroll's theory on the importance of historical context offers one explanation for this reworking of Bob's character. The success of a film in classic Hollywood depended on its star power; an essential element of this power was the ability to craft a marketable persona. These personae were developed by actors through "the personalities of the various characters they played over the course of their careers and out of the elements of their personal lives that [had] become public knowledge."²¹¹ The cold, efficient and distant character of Heskett was unmarketable and certainly inapplicable to Fred MacMurray's carefully crafted comedy persona of all-around-nice guy.

While Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in cinema explains Erskine's characterization of Bob and the marriage, the fact that *The Egg and I* movie "obsessively centers and re-centers around a female protagonist, placing her in the position of agency, it offers some resistance to analysis which stresses the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the woman, her objectification as a spectacle according to the masculine structure of the gaze."²¹² Oddly, it is a male reviewer's comment on the film a day after its release that provides a way of uncovering the male gaze in such a problematic vehicle.

Bosley Crowther's regular column "The Screen in Review" offered a scathing critique of the film after it premiered at the Radio City Music Hall April 24, 1947. Declaring it a "watered-down rewrite," Crowther asserts that the film had none of "the original's earthy tang" or its "observation and wit," and that the director missed the opportunity "to do a delightful satire upon the movement back to the farm."²¹³ Crowther did not think this was the result of Erskine being "too much intimidated by the cleanly Production Code to attempt a legitimate reflection of the racier substance of the book"; rather, he was "more concerned with making a quaint and cozy cut-up for the reliable women's trade" describing Colbert as appropriately "sororal" and MacMurray as "conventionally uxorial."²¹⁴ The critic is, ostensibly, describing a film made by men but designed for women.

²¹¹ J. Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2005) 98.

²¹² Doane, "'The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," 70.

²¹³ Bosley Crowther, "Screen in Review," 29.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

Although the socophilia aspects of male gaze theory are not apparent in this “women’s film,” the proscribed gender roles presented in the film, and the belief that these standard formulas have appeal for a female audience, indicate the 1940s American female audience’s subscription to the values imparted by the male gaze. Colbert’s evolving persona serves as a microcosm for the changing gender roles of the American woman from depression-era to post World War II. From the original “fast talking dame” in *It Happened One Night* (1934) to the ultimate mother in *Family Honeymoon* (1949), *The Egg and I* fits the trajectory of Colbert’s persona and transition of the American woman from Rosie the Riveter to June Cleaver. In the character of Betty, a woman whose main focus was on her husband and the state of her marriage, when she was accorded agency it resulted in folly – leaving her husband for a supposed love affair when in actuality he is buying her a more modern farm. Having her baby in exile and returning to look like the fool for her flight appropriately punished Betty.

Levey’s interpretation of MacDonald’s book claims that the work falls short of an out and out critique of the American institution of marriage. When contrasted with the film version, the popular autobiographical novel offers volumes more commentary on gender roles than the Colbert movie. What is more surprising is the public’s acceptance of MacDonald’s divorce and remarriage – something completely eradicated from the film version. In 1946, *LIFE* magazine published an article entitled “Life Goes Calling on the Author of *The Egg and I*” in which her divorce and remarriage are explicitly mentioned.²¹⁵ Despite public acceptance of this unconventional narrative – as indicated by her steady book sales after the release of the *LIFE* article – Erskine insisted on a plotline that made the dissolved marriage the focal point of his film. Literature provided an avenue for social critique, however thinly veiled, that Hollywood was unwilling to allow.

The film version of *The Egg and I*, regardless of its original source, offers a chance to analyze the presence of the male gaze in a film where the acknowledged target audience is female. The back and forth between the two rivals, Betty and Harriet, over the clueless Bob’s head, implies a metaphorical nudge and wink to the intended female audience. However, Betty’s ill-informed flight and senseless ravings, as well as Bob’s parting shot that wives must implicitly

²¹⁵ *Life*, “Life Goes Calling on the Author of *The Egg and I*,” (March 18 1946), 35.

trust their husbands, is indicative of the recurring theme of post-World War II media: authority re-invested in the returning soldier husband, not the so recently independent wife. The gradual re-crafting of Colbert's persona to one that placed a premium on motherhood as the appropriate role of American women is never so apparent as when she utters the lines "this is all that really matters," holding the baby she will eventually return with to her patiently waiting husband. There are two very separate messages in the book and in the film, and they are competing messages about gender and American marriage. The existence of these messages under the same title is a commentary on the complicated nature of American postwar mass culture.

In her 1993 article "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture 1946 – 1958," Joanne Meyerowitz, Chair of American Studies at Yale University and co-director of the Yale Research Initiative on the History of Sexualities, challenged Friedan's argument presented in *The Feminine Mystique*, published thirty years earlier. By sampling nonfiction articles on women from a larger sample than Friedan's research, Meyerowitz concludes that postwar magazines "delivered multiple messages, which women could read as sometimes supporting and sometimes subverting the 'feminine mystique.'"²¹⁶ Building on Stuart Hall's cultural theory, and the trend amongst early 1990s historians to view mass culture as "neither monolithic nor unrelentingly recessive," Meyerowitz examines the twelve years which are bookended, coincidentally, by MacDonald's fame and death, through the lens of cultural theory.²¹⁷

Meyerowitz suggests that although the 1950s saw an increase in nonfiction articles that featured women as successful public figures rather than urging women back to the kitchen, there exists a continuity between the interwar and postwar decades.²¹⁸ Magazine articles throughout the mid nineteenth century "advocated both domestic ideals and nondomestic achievement for women."²¹⁹ MacDonald, whose works were serialized in two of the publications in Meyerowitz' sample (*Ladies' Home Journal* and *Atlantic Monthly*), could have been one of the

²¹⁶ Meyerowitz sampled non-fiction articles from *Atlantic Monthly*, *Coronet*, *Ebony*, *Harper's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Negro Digest*, *Reader's Digest*, *Woman's Home Companion*. Friedan's research for *The Feminine Mystique* focused on short story fiction from four popular magazines. 1457

²¹⁷ Stuart Hall, "Culture, Media, and the 'Ideological Effect,'" in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (Beverly Hills, 1979), 315-48.

²¹⁸ Meyerowitz, 1458.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 1477.

“competing voices” that “presented women as successful public figures.”²²⁰ A combined analysis of the film and book exemplifies the many layers of mass culture and the infinite contemporary interpretations; as such, they would be highly useful teaching texts, and the reassessment of MacDonald’s significance must include an interdisciplinary approach to her place in mass culture.

²²⁰ Meyerowitz, 1458.

CONCLUSION

It would be remiss if a thesis on Betty MacDonald did not include some mention of her *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* children's series, which has achieved more longevity with American audiences than her adult works, and merited even less scholarly attention. The success of these books in the United States is negligible compared to the enthusiasm international readers have for them. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle has several international identities: Fru Pille-Ville in Denmark, Mevrouw Piggle-Wiggle in Holland, Madame Bigote-Gigote in France, Frau Pudle-Dudle in Germany, Piguru Iguru Obassan in Japan, Tant Mittiprick in Sweden and Napady Tetky-Vesevedky in the Czech Republic.²²¹ A 1998 Czech translation by Ol'ga Kralovicova of *Hello, Mrs. Piggle* (1957, MacDonald's last book before her death in 1958) was selected in 2000 by the International Board on Books for Young People. Japanese translations have been published as recently as 2011.

Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is the widow of a pirate who lives in an upside down house located in a 1950s American suburban neighborhood. When parents have problems with their children's behaviors they are usually advised by friends to seek out the assistance of Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle. Her solutions range from the psychological to the fantastical. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle advises the parents of Joan and Anne (also the name MacDonald's daughters) to mimic their daughters' petty squabbling (but over adult issues such as whose turn it is to have the car) in order to quell it. For children with bad table manners, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle lends the parents a pig whose behavior at table is impeccable, to the astonishment of the erring child. The most famous Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle cure, and one that was released on its own as an illustrated children's book in England, is the Radish Cure. When Patsy suddenly stops cooperating at bath time, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle advises her mother and father to "let Patsy strictly alone, as far as washing is concerned, for several weeks. When she has about half an inch of rich black dirt all over her and after she is asleep, scatter radish seeds on her arms and head."²²² The result is several little radishes and Patsy bathing regularly. Like other American tall tales, this one begins realistically and works a fantastic and utterly improbable twist into the story in a very casual way.

²²¹ In Great Britain she keeps the name Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, but *Hello Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* is published as *Hullo Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* by British presses.

²²² Betty MacDonald, *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*, (New York: Lippincott, 1947), 74.

The Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle books introduced international readers to the hallmarks of the American tall tale set, incongruously, in American suburbia. They also show a reverence for the older generation, something that the move towards the nuclear household slowly eradicated in American culture. International audiences would have less trouble according such respect to the generation before their parents. Like her childhood home, which included an *en residence* grandmother and her home in the Roosevelt district of Seattle that contained three generations, MacDonald had more in common with the Japanese and European experience of intergenerational living. The Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle books, which have not received scholarly attention to date, have much to say about the postwar middle-class family, although her loving and insightful portrayal of children's nature remains accurate and relevant today.²²³

After the release of *The Egg and I*, MacDonald was sued by some of the members of the community surrounding the Heskett ranch. Five years and two and half million copies after the initial publication of *The Egg and I*, ten plaintiffs sought \$975,000 in compensation from MacDonald and Lippincott. Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Pacific Lutheran, Beth Kraig in 1998 wrote an article for *Columbian Magazine*, an organ of the Washington State Historical Society detailing the trial, paying particular attention to the often hilarious plaintiffs' testimonies. In the conclusion, Kraig points out that "[a]ttitudes towards humorous caricature, opportunities for profiting through the possession of a public identity, and the literary status of memoirs have also evolved in the last half-century, leading to a contemporary climate in which both sides of the label case brought against MacDonald seems strongly dated."²²⁴ Kraig suggests yet another new field of inquiry prompted by a reevaluation of Betty MacDonald's place in postwar culture.

Previous scholarship on the subject of Betty MacDonald and her works, although excellent, have limited the scope of inquiry, at the same time diminishing her significance, by labeling her a domestic humorist. International recognition prompts a re-evaluation of her adult autobiographical books. In his interview for *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Wolfgang Hampel

²²³ Two articles on the Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle series have been released. J. Ellen Gainor's "The Slow-Eater-Tiny-Bite-Taker": An Eating Disorder in Betty MacDonald's *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*" (*Disorderly Eaters*, Ed. Lilian R. Farst and Peter W. Graham. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992. 29-41) analyzes the presence of anorexia in one of the Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle stories. Claudia J. Mills "'Powders and Pills to Help Cure Children's Bad Habits': The Medicalization of Misbehavior in Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle" (*Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 26, No.4, 2002) examines how the Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle books indicate the postwar shift from assessing children's behavior morally to medically.

²²⁴ Beth Kraig, "Betty and the Bishops: Was The Egg and I Libelous?" *Columbia Magazine*, (Spring 1998), 17-22.

asserted that MacDonald's popularity in Europe stems from the fact that "she had a very hard life, but she could also smile and she had for every situation a laugh. Our life is a tragicomedy, and she showed us this."²²⁵ The use of humor to understand, and survive, life's difficulties is a seminal quality that defines the American humorists. It also translates across languages, cultures and time. The postwar book propaganda effort could not have asked for a better ambassador of the American character than Betty MacDonald. Her value as an American author and her place in the tradition of American humor far exceeds that of merely a quaint domestic authoress. Her works complicate and enrich the picture of American life during the first half of the twentieth century.

²²⁵ Goodnow, "Egg and Betty."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Anonymous. "Betty MacDonald." Pamphlet. Published by Ditchling Press, Ltd., 1956.
Obtained from <http://www.friendsofbettymacdonald.org>

Anonymous. "Betty MacDonald Author of 'The Egg and I'" (Obituaries). *The Times*. Monday, Feb 10, 1958; pg.14; Issue 54071; col B.

Bosley, Crowther. "The Screen in Review: 'The Egg and I,' Film Version of Betty MacDonald Novel Starring Claudette Colbert, Is New Bill at Radio City." *New York Times*. April 25, 1947. Pg. 29. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2008).

Burn, June. *Living High*. Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941.

Hutla, Dusan. "Betty Inspired Czechs." Translated by Zora Nedoma. Friends of Betty MacDonald website. <http://bettymacdonald.net/721286801.html>. 2001.

Life, "Life Goes Calling on the Author of *The Egg and I*," (March 18 1946), 35.

MacDonald, Betty. *The Egg and I*. New York: Lippincott, 1945, 1-278.

MacDonald, Betty. *The Plague and I*. New York: Lippincott, 1948, 1-254.

MacDonald Betty. *Anybody Can Do Anything*. New York: Lippincott, 1950, 1-257.

MacDonald, Betty. "And It Happened to Me." *Saturday Evening Post*, June-August 1950

MacDonald, Betty. *Onions in the Stew*. New York: Lippincott, 1955, 1-.

MacDonaldová, Betty. *Vejce a já*. Translated by Eva Marxová. Praha: Vysehrad, 1991.
(Czech)

MacDonaldová, Betty. *Vajce a já*. Translated by Bohuslav Kompis. Bratislava: Mladé Letá, 1989. (Slovak)

Pinkerton, Kathrene Sutherland Gedney. *Wilderness Wife*. New York: Carrick and Evans, Inc, 1939.

Rich, Louise Dickinson. *We Took to the Woods*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott company, 1942

Sone, Monica. *Nisei Daughter*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1993.

South, Jean. "Review: *The Plague and I* by Betty MacDonald," *The American Journal of Nursing*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Feb., 1949), pp. 42-44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3458748> .

Special Collections/Archives

Betty Bard MacDonald Papers. University of Washington.

Secondary Sources

Articles and Book Chapters

Carroll, Noel. "The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48(4), 1990. 349-360.

Decker, Paula. "Blanche Caffiere: An Appreciation." History Link website.
http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8060. 2006.

Ferber, Marianne A. and Phyllis Hutton Raabe. "Women in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Czech Style." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Toward Gender Equity: Policies and Strategies (Spring, 2003), pp. 407-430.

Friedman, Lawrence M. and Robert V. Percival. "Who Sues For Divorce? From Fault Through Fiction to Freedom," *Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1976), 61-82.

Gainor, J. Ellen "The Slow-Eater-Tiny-Bite-Taker": An Eating Disorder in Betty MacDonald's *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*." *Disorderly Eaters*, Ed. Lilian R. Farst and Peter W. Graham. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992. 29-42.

Goodnow, Cecelia. "The Egg and Betty: Author's Legend Lives on Overseas, Regardless of Her Literary Standing." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (Seattle, WA) 23 Nov. 1996: B1. Gale U.S. History In Context. Obtained from <http://www.friendsofbettymacdonald.org>.

Griswold, Robert L. "If Not Ward Cleaver, Then Who?" *Journal of Women's History*. Vol. 13, No. 3, Autumn 2001.

Jackson, Jennifer. "New Owners Take on Rural Life with Egg and I Farm," *The Wenatchee World*, April 9, 2008. <http://www.wenatcheeworld.com/news/2008/apr/09/new-owners-take-on-rural-life-with-egg-and-i-farm/?print>

Kopecky, Petr. "The Story of John Steinbeck in Communist Czechoslovakia." *Steinbeck Studies*, vol. 16 (Spring 2005). Pp. 80-90.

Martin, Douglas. "James S. Moran Dies at 91: Master of the Publicity Stunt," *New York Times* (1923-Current file); Oct 24, 1999, pg. 45; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009).

- Mills, Claudia J. "Powders and Pills to Help Cure Children's Bad Habits": The Medicalization of Misbehavior in Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 26, No.4, 2002.
- Plateris, Alexander A. "100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics, United States, 1867-1967." DHEW Publication No. (HRA) 74-1902. U.S. Departments of Health, Education, and Welfare. Public Health Service. Health Resources Administration, National Center for Health Statistics. Rockville, Md. December 1973.
- Smejkalová, Jiriina. "Censors and Their Readers: Selling, Silence and Reading Czech Books." *Libraries and the Cultural Record*, Vol. 36 (Winter 2001). Pp. 87-103.
- Upchurch, Michael. "Writer Betty MacDonald Still Has Much to Say," *Seattle Times*, March 12, 2008, http://seattletimes.com/html/books/2004275229_macdonald120.html
- Vlosky, Denese Ashbaugh and Pamela A. Monroe, "The Effective Dates of No-Fault Divorce Laws in the 50 States," *Family Relations* Vol. 51, No. 4, *Families and the Law* (Oct., 2002), 321.
- Walker, Nancy A. "I Can't Write a Book" Women's Humor and the American Realistic Tradition." *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* v. 23, no.3 Special Issue on the Canon of the Realistic Period (Spring, 1991).

Books

- Arlen, Alice, and Louise Dickinson Rich. *She Took to the Woods: A Biography and Selected Writings of Louise Dickinson Rich*. Rockport, Me: Down East Books, 2000.
- Bier, Jesse. *The Rise and Fall of American Humor*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.
- Belton, J. *American Cinema/American Culture*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2005.
- Bland, Bartholomew and Penelope Joan Fritzer. *Merry Wives and Others: a History of Domestic Humor Writing*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2002.
- Caldwell, Mark. *The Last Crusade: The War on Consumption, 1862-1954*. New York: Atheneum, 1988.
- Ceello, Kristin. *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth-Century United States*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York: Viking, 2005.

- Cott, Nancy F. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Doane, Mary Ann, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams. *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984.
- Gates, Robert Allan. *American Literary Humor During the Great Depression*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Harkins, William Edward, and Paul I. Trensky. *Czech Literature Since 1956: A Symposium*. New York: Bohemica, 1980.
- Hauck, Richard Boyd. *A Cheerful Nihilism; Confidence and "the Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.
- Hench, John B. *Books As Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets in the Era of World War II*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Johnston, William. *The Modern Epidemic: A History of Tuberculosis in Japan*. Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1995.
- Kercher, Stephen E. *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Kolinsky, Eva. *Women in West Germany: Life, Work, and Politics*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 1989.
- Kraszewski, Charles S. *The Romantic Hero and Contemporary Anti-Hero in Polish and Czech Literature: Great Souls and Grey Men*. Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998.
- Levey, J.F. "Imagining the family in postwar popular culture: The case of the egg and I and cheaper by the dozen." *Journal of Womens History*, 13(3), 2001. 125-150.
- Love, Stephen. "Review: *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, by Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin," *Harvard Review*, No. 8)Spring, 1995, pp. 188-189.
- Lupack, B. T.. *Vision/Re-Vision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne J. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture 1946-1958." *Journal of American History*. Vol. 79, No. 4, 1455-1482.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne J. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, Autumn, 1975.
- Nilsen, Don Lee Fred. *Humor in American Literature: a Selected Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1992.
- Novák, Arne, and William Edward Harkins. *Czech Literature*. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976.
- Ott, Katherine. *Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture Since 1870*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Pratt, Alan R. *Black Humor: Critical Essays*. New York: Garland Pub, 1993.
- Rothman, Sheila M. *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History*. New York: BasicBooks, 1994.
- Rothschild, Joseph, and Nancy M. Wingfield. *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Siegel, Kristi. *Women's Autobiographies, Culture, Feminism*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Walker, Nancy A., and Zita Dresner. *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988.
- Walker, Nancy A. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Yates, Norris Wilson. *The American Humorist: Conscience of the Twentieth Century*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1964.

Databases

- Ruggles, Steven, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0* [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Samantha Hoekstra

Education

August, 2010 B.S. American Studies, Florida State University

August, 2007 A.A., Valencia Community College

May, 2000 Winter Park High School

Master's thesis

The Egg and Us: Contextualization and Historicization of Betty MacDonald's Works

Teaching Experience

Spring 2013 Grading Assistant, AMH2097 Race and Ethnicity

Fall 2012 Grading Assistant, AMH2097 Race and Ethnicity

Summer 2012 Grading Assistant and Discussion Leader, CARE Program AMH2020

Spring 2012 Grading Assistant, AMH2097 Race and Ethnicity

Fall 2012 Grading Assistant, AMH2097 Race and Ethnicity

Spring 2013 Grading Assistant, AMH2097 Race and Ethnicity

Summer 2012 Grading Assistant and Discussion Leader, CARE Program AMH2020

Relevant coursework

Graduate

Fall 2013 HIS6934 Colloquium: Early African American History

Fall 2013 AMH5577 Black America Since 1877

Spring 2013 HIS6934 Colloquium: Black Conservatives

Fall 2012 HIS6059 Historical Methods

Fall 2012 HIS6941 Teaching College History

Summer 2012 AMH5239 U.S. 1920-1945

Summer 2012 HIS5935 Teaching College History With Film

Spring 2012 AMH5177 The Civil War Era

Spring 2012 WST5934 Gender in Popular Culture

Fall 2011 HIS6934 Approaches to History

Summer 2011 AMH5645 Humor and the American Mind

Summer 2011 HIS5935 Black America in Film

Spring 2011 HIS6934 Seminar: History of American Marriage

Fall 2010 HIS5909 Colloquium: Reconstruction

Undergraduate

Fall 2009 AMH4173 Post Civil War 1865-1890

Fall 2009 ARH4261 U.S. Art to 1876

Summer 2009 AMH4585 Seminole Indian History

Summer 2009 HIS4930 Southern History Through Film

Spring 2009 AMH4270 U.S. Since 1945

Spring 2009 AMH4332 U.S. Intellectual History II

Spring 2009 AMH4572 Black America Since 1877

Fall 2008 U.S. Art 1876-1950s

Summer 2008 AMH4571 Black America to 1877
Spring 2008 AMS3932 American Authors Since 1975
Spring 2008 AMS4935 20th Century American Novel
Spring 2008 AMS3310 Comic Books
Fall 2007 AMS3310 American Women Between the World Wars
Fall 2007 AMS3310 Religion and American Culture
Fall 2007 AMS3810 Underground Music

Achievements

Spring, 2007 Excellence in History Award, Valencia Community College

Special Interests

American Studies

American Humor

Interwar American Woman

Gender

History through film

Interdisciplinary approaches to history

American humor abroad

Additional Experience

August 2004 – August 2007 Customer Service Representative, Blockbuster

September 2000 – May 2004 Certified Nursing Assistant, Florida