



## **Betty and the Bishops: Was The Egg and I Libelous?**

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**By Beth Kraig**

In October 1945, flush on the heels of V-J Day and perfectly timed to catch the nation's readers in a mood of festive celebration, the publishing firm of J. B. Lippincott released a quirky, apparently autobiographical book about a young woman's maturation in the Pacific Northwest during the early decades of the century. Although the book opened with tales of the author's childhood, given zest by the peripatetic career of her father, whose jobs as a mining engineer took the family from Colorado to Idaho, Mexico, Montana and Washington, its central chapters traced the story of her first marriage, in 1927, to an insurance broker named Robert Heskett. The book was *The Egg and I*, and within a year of publication it had sold more than a million copies. This astonishing success transformed its author, Betty MacDonald, into a media darling whose triumphs and travails greatly entertained the Puget Sound region that she called home.

More than half a century later it is obvious that some of the reasons for the runaway success of *The Egg and I* derived from the intersection of its key themes with the emotional needs of many Americans in the late 1940s. The book provided an element of escapism for its readers, carrying them back 20 years and erasing the recent traumas of depression and war. Following their honeymoon, Betty and husband Bob Heskett had moved to a remote area of the Olympic Peninsula to realize Bob's dream of rustic self-sufficiency through constructing and operating a chicken farm. Portraying enemies no more severe than drizzly weather or a wood stove that stubbornly refused to provide heat, *The Egg and I* chronicled Betty's efforts to find happiness in the wilderness.

But while her droll descriptions of skittish chickens provided light entertainment, MacDonald implicitly urged her readers to count their blessings and steer away from romantic dreams of rural life. Paying the monthly utility bills would become a moment of joy, if one realized how tiresome it could be to live perpetually with dampness and soot. For the many fledgling suburbanites poised to buy look-alike houses and facing a probable future of humdrum repetition, MacDonald's rueful accounts of adventure's down side must have given comfort.

The book provided more timeless attractions as well, including its vividly drawn portraits of the Heskett's friends and acquaintances. With humor, and in tones ranging from fond to acerbic, MacDonald sketched a colorful crew of characters. Her closest neighbors, the Kettle family, took center stage in some of the book's most comic moments. Ma Kettle, a complacent woman with crude but amiable habits, complemented Pa Kettle, her hapless and deviously slothful husband. Some of their fifteen children, seven still at home and eight married and "scattered in and around the mountains," also figured prominently in MacDonald's anecdotes. "I enjoyed the Kettles," MacDonald wrote, because "they shocked, amused, irritated and comforted me." And indeed, the Kettles' endearing and entertaining qualities proved so significant that the

characters of Ma and Pa, played by Marjorie Main and Percy Kilbride in the 1947 film version of the book, became lead figures in a series of "Kettle films" developed by Universal Studios.

Many circles of fascination rippled out from the book's popularity and washed over people and places associated with it. Betty MacDonald was an obvious point of interest for fans of *The Egg and I*, and her contemporary life became the subject of newspaper and magazine profiles. Second husband Don MacDonald and Betty's two daughters from her first marriage became minor celebrities, although journalists occasionally confused Don with Bob Heskett or mistakenly claimed that the MacDonalds' attractive waterfront home on Vashon Island was the site of the book's chicken farm.

Eggs gained status, as photographers artfully included them in snapshots of Betty and her family. One creative bit of public relations had Betty dropping raw eggs from the 12th-story balcony of the Northwest Mutual Fire Insurance Building at the corner of Third and Pine in Seattle. This bit of fun actually promoted a host of goods and activities: while MacDonald aimed for absorbent mats manufactured by the U. S. Rubber Company, two Seattle Rainiers catchers stood by to cushion the eggs after they rebounded unbroken from the mats, and the crowd of bystanders was invited into the nearby Bon Marche to watch demonstrations of an exciting new product television.

Readers and journalists who were savvy enough to realize that the MacDonalds' Vashon Island home was not the site of the Heskett's chicken farm did not have to search long for the real thing. In 1946 a real estate notice in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* advertised that "The Egg and I farm" was up for sale. Situated near Chimacum, on the Quimper Peninsula, the farm had been attracting curious tourists for months. Owners Alfred and Anita Larsen explained that along with the property came an unusual business opportunity charging those curious tourists an entrance fee of one dollar per car, which had netted the Larsens over \$500 already.

Such a story, replete with photos of the farm and a stove that the Larsens believed was the one that had confounded MacDonald's efforts to keep her house warm, certainly reinforced the verisimilitude of the settings and stories in *The Egg and I*. And MacDonald's own prominence in the public eye clearly reflected her readers' belief that they knew her, that from her book they had gleaned "truths" about her life. But in 1951, more than five years and over two and a half million copies after the first edition of *The Egg and I* rolled off the presses, the accuracy of the book became the central point of dispute in a Seattle courtroom.

On February 6, 1951, ten plaintiffs brought libel actions against Betty MacDonald, her second husband Don, the Bon Marche (in its capacity as a retail outlet for books), and the publishers of the hardback and paperback editions of *The Egg and I* (Lippincott and Pocket Books, Inc., respectively). The plaintiffs alleged that MacDonald had damaged their reputations through her unflattering portraits of them (albeit with fictional names) in *The Egg and I*. Nine plaintiffs, 87-year-old Albert Bishop and eight of his adult-aged children, argued that they were "the ramshackle Kettle family" featured so prominently in MacDonald's stories; the tenth plaintiff, Raymond Johnson, claimed that he was "Crowbar," a Native American character who, with his brothers "Clamface" and "Geoduck," were depicted as close friends of Bob Heskett.

Given the \$975,000 in compensation sought by the plaintiffs, the suit represented a serious threat to MacDonald and her fellow defendants. Nevertheless, from its onset the trial assumed comical overtones that surely reminded *The Egg and I* readers of that work's tongue-in-cheek quality. Seattle newspapers, recognizing the indisputably rich vein of humor that the case would tap, provided daily coverage of testimony.

With defense attorneys and journalists carefully referring to the book as a "novel," colorful statements from the plaintiffs and their supporting witnesses initiated act one of the seriocomedy. To support the plaintiffs'

claim that the book was not fictional, residents of the Quimper Peninsula took the stand to explain how MacDonald's use of "Docktown" and "Town" as names for two key locales could not obscure the striking matches between her descriptions and the actual communities of Port Ludlow and Port Townsend. One especially feisty witness, 75-year-old Annie McGuire, resembling a lumberjack in a black and red checked shirt, could not stifle laughter when passages from the book were read to her. However, she also proclaimed that she would have "beat up" MacDonald at the time of the book's publication had she been able to find her.

The plaintiffs also proved highly engaging in their appearances before the court. Various Bishop family members explained that "it's always bad when someone makes fun of you." And yet, the family seemed to provide more fuel for that fate. George Bishop, for example, willingly agreed that his father Albert had managed to burn down the family's barn while attempting to burn trash, an escapade that MacDonald had described both to explain the fears that fire generated in a rural area and the immediate volunteerism of neighbors who pulled together to douse the flames. Wilbur Bishop, who claimed to be "Elwin Kettle," a teenager often-mentioned by MacDonald, "thrust his face close to each juror" to let him or her judge the merits of his claim that he had blue eyes, like those ascribed to "Elwin" in the book. This performance, a journalist noted, elicited "appreciative laughter" from the courtroom audience.

Another amusing point of comparison centered on the discrepancy between the number of children in the Bishop family (13) and the number of Kettle offspring (15). Niceties of language were likewise featured as points of debate, as when one witness carefully explained that a description of Pa Kettle's business as "begging" (because no matter "what humiliations, what insults it entailed-it was better than working") did not really fit Albert Bishop, who in the opinion of the witness was "not lazy perhaps a bit impractical."

A problematic element of the plaintiffs' case emerged quickly as witnesses to their claim demurred when asked if they had thought less of the Bishops because of MacDonald's book and tended to point to ways in which the Bishops were clearly better than the Kettles. One stated that he "could never think less of them" and wouldn't desert them even if they were going to jail. Others belabored the differences between the sterling characters of particular Bishop family members and the shiftless Kettles, with witnesses especially disputing the idea that the late Suzanne Bishop, Albert's wife, would ever have peppered her speeches with emphatic use of obscenities, a characteristic pattern in Ma Kettle's soliloquies. With such witnesses perhaps forgetting that the plaintiffs needed to prove that they were unmistakably the real-life inspirations for the Kettles, their testimony seemed ultimately to favor MacDonald's defense.

Betty MacDonald's own statements in court were cagey and, coming from a woman who had thoroughly demonstrated the sharpness of her mind in her writing, conveyed a clever (albeit questionable) argument. She had not kept a diary or journal during her first marriage, she explained, and thus could not have drawn from factual materials when writing *The Egg and I*, almost 20 years after her residence on the Quimper Peninsula. She had few memories of the Bishop family, she said, and did not have the actual communities of Chimacum, Port Ludlow or Port Townsend in mind when writing her book. Instead, she had simply created the book's settings (and characters, with the exception of her own family members). "In all my descriptions of all towns I tried to picture a typical town," she told the court.

Even for readers of *The Egg and I* who visit Port Ludlow or Port Townsend in the late 1990s, MacDonald's explanation may push the limits of credulity. Her description of "Docktown" referred to the "great sawmill" that centered the waterfront community, and also commented on the "company store" and "string of ugly company houses." While she did note that the town's aroma, a "delicious mixture of creosote, cedar and seaweed," was characteristic of coastal mill towns, Port Ludlow's obvious proximity to the Heskett's actual home makes it hard to believe that images of that location were not influential in shaping MacDonald's literary imagination. Similarly, MacDonald described "Town" as a place caught up in feverish boosterism in

the 1890s but shunned ultimately as a railroad terminus. Its "happy founders," having overestimated their town's attractiveness to the railroad, had "whipped up a trousseau of three- and four-story brick buildings, a huge and elaborate red stone courthouse" and "large, befurbelowed Victorian houses." MacDonald also referred to the army post and Coast Guard branch "within arm's length" of "Town," the "long sweeping hill that curved down" to its "beautiful harbor," and the "purply-green marshes we crossed at the bottom of the hill." Surely these many detailed observations do not evoke images of a "typical town," even in the Puget Sound region. In fact, MacDonald's portraits of "Town" are so vivid a match for their community that even today, 50 years later, Port Townsend's promoters could do far worse than to use her phrases to attract tourists.

But to suggest that MacDonald did not take much poetic license when moving from actual details of Quimper Peninsula geography to her book's scenic backdrops is not to take the plaintiffs' side in the trial. MacDonald was not the only witness for her defense, and her attorneys had a few aces up their sleeves. Just how damaged had the Bishops been by *The Egg and I*?

The Bishops, witnesses testified, had actually promoted the story that they were the real-life Kettles and had found profit in doing so. A deposition from the editor of the Port Townsend Leader explained that he had published a story about the Bishop farm being the "Kettle farm" because one of the plaintiffs, Madeline Bishop Kolmes, had told him that it was fine to print this information. Another witness described a barn dance held in 1947 at a facility operated by plaintiff Walter Bishop, at which Walter had introduced his father Albert from the stage, to an audience of 500 dancers, as "Paw Kettle." Albert, the witness claimed, had then performed a little jig with a chicken tucked under his arm. The Bishops, a lawyer hired by Lippincott noted, had "secretly enjoyed" their association with the famous book.

By the end of the afternoon on February 19, 1951, both sides in the case concluded their arguments. The jury then deliberated for the remainder of that day and most of the next before providing their verdict: not guilty. Their ballots had been unanimous on the first round of voting, the jurors revealed. Prior to voting, they had spent most of their time listening as a juror read *The Egg and I* aloud, following the judge's instructions to them that all members should be familiar with its contents.

The jurors' verdict did not constitute the final words on the case, for the plaintiffs appealed to the judge, William J. Wilkins, to overrule the jury. On March 16th Wilkins denied the plaintiffs' motion for a new trial, but his comments accompanying that decision were illuminating. Had he been on the jury, he noted, he might have "at least, concluded that the author had the individuals and their characteristics in mind when writing the book, though it could be said that portions of the descriptions were fictional." He might in some instances have awarded nominal damages, Wilkins said, but the difference between the interpretation that he made of the evidence and that made by the jury was not so overwhelming that he could justify overruling the verdict.

Betty MacDonald professed enormous relief at the outcome of the case, and it ultimately represented only a small detour in her 13-year journey as a successful writer. Her second and third books for adult readers had already been published by the time of the trial, and her fourth appeared three years later. She also authored several books for young readers, creating the much-loved character of Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, who lives on in both literary and dramatic form. A play for children based on Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle has drawn large audiences in the late 1990s, and should handily carry MacDonald's legacy forward into the next century. Paperback reprints of *The Egg and I* can be found in bookstores throughout the Puget Sound area, and MacDonald's works for adult readers remain well-known and well-read in Europe: (especially in Germany), where her use of humor in response to adversity is much admired.

Betty MacDonald died of cancer in 1958, at the age of 49, and did not live to see the Northwest, and particularly Seattle, become nationally-recognized as a favorite home for writers. Attitudes toward 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 libel case brought against MacDonald seem strongly dated. And yet, with its oddball moments and mildly sarcastic touches, the case fittingly extends the characterization of Betty MacDonald drawn by the author herself as a quick-witted and resilient resident of a region moving rapidly from the 19th century into the next millennium.

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