

MAKING SENSE OF **YE BOOK OF SENSE**

In July 2003 I purchased a book of limericks entitled *Ye Book of Sense*. Published by Porter & Coates, 822 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, the title page states *A Companion to the Book of Nonsense*. No author is identified and no date of publication is given. WORLDCAT lists two library copies of the book and abebooks is currently offering one for sale. Interested parties can see a digitised copy online, along with an essay on its possible origin¹.

The book consists of 33 limericks, 32 of which are illustrated. Pages are printed on one side only, so the back of every page is blank. I think the quality of the limericks is significantly better than Lear's. Consider for example the delightful silliness of:-

There was an old man who said— “Oh!
That spider has trod on my toe!
I was asked to a ball,
In Free Mason’s Hall,
And now I’m so lame I can’t go.”

Several have appeared in later compilations², for example:-

There was an old man who said— “Do
Tell me how I’m to add two and two?
I’m not very sure
That it doesn’t make four;
But, I fear that is almost too few.”

Naturally this one has '*gone forth and multiplied*' in a mathematical sense³:-

There was an old man who said, “Gee!
I can’t multiply seven by three!
Though fourteen seems plenty,
It might come to twenty—
I haven’t the slightest idee!”

And also in a biological sense⁴:-

There was an old man who said— “Cor
Working out one plus one is a chore.
I don’t know about you
But I usually get two;
But with rabbits I get thirty-four.”

¹ Marco Graziosi's Nonsenselit.org site contains a scan of Arthur Deex's copy. It also contains Arthur's essay, which appeared originally in *Pentatette*, May, 1988. The contents of Arthur's book are identical to mine. His front cover has virtually the same picture as the English edition. My front and back covers are deeply embossed with a similar picture, which is simpler in its format.

² *A Nonsense Anthology*, Carolyn Wells, 1902, Charles Scribner's Sons, page 263.

The Faber Book of Nursery Verse, chosen by Barbara Ireson, 2nd edition 1965, page 221.

³ *Carolyn Wells' Book of American Limericks*, G. P. Putnam's Sons. New York & London, 1925, page 85.

⁴ I confess; I wrote this.

And, talking about examples which have been re-written by less-than-pure minds, I am sure readers know the fate of this one⁵:-

There was an old man who said— “Why
Can't I put my own chin in my eye?
If I give my mind to it,
I think I could do it,
But no one can tell, till they try.”

Keen students of limerick history will be aware of the following reference by Legman⁶:-

“A British imitation of Lear [...] was
Ye Book of Sense (Torquay and
London, 1863).”

This intrigued me; was this the same book as my American copy? If so, which came first? Interest piqued I began an investigation which took far longer than I ever thought it would.

First things first. What can we glean from my American edition? There is a neat pen inscription in the front which reads 1873 *Matilda F. Pearson, Germantown, Phila.*, seemingly written over a nearly erased pencil version. The back page has *Tillie F. Pearson* written in pencil. I think I would have liked young Tillie; she seems a very caring sort. One of the illustrations in the book shows an old gentleman with just a few hairs sprouting from his nearly bald cranium. The limerick reads:-

There was an old man who said— “Where
Shall I find some pomade for my hair?
What is left I must cherish,
Or it surely will perish,
And I'll be reduced to despair.”

By judicious use of her pencil Tillie has carefully doubled the number of follicles he possesses.

Obviously anybody can write anything in a book, but I tend to trust kindly people. Of the two copies known to WORLDCAT, one notes an inscription which reads 1878.

Let's turn now to the English edition. The database COPAC records “all” books in UK major libraries. Of the two copies listed, enquiries ascertained that the one in the National Library of Scotland had gone missing. I have carefully examined the copy in the British Library. The title page reads:-

Ye BOOK of SENSE.

“*Is it true, think you?*”

Winter's Tale.

E. Croydon, Printer and Publisher, Royal Library, Torquay. London,
Whittaker and Co., Ave Maria Lane

⁵ For those who don't, try limerick number 843 in volume 2 of *The Limerick*, Gershon Legman, Panther paperback edition.

⁶ *The Limerick*, Gershon Legman. See page 8 of the Introduction in the 2 volume Panther edition.

The first thing to note is what is not there. Nowhere on the cover or the title page does it say *A Companion to the Book of Nonsense*. This only appears in the American edition. Secondly, there are seven more limericks in this edition as compared to the American book, and the sequence of limericks is quite different. Thirdly, there is a date stamp on every blank page reading BRITISH MUSEUM 11 DEC 63. (The British Library is the successor to the British Museum and contains all the BM's books.)

One of the additional limericks has quite a philosophical turn to it:-

There was an old man who said — What
An uncommonly beautiful spot!
Now really, this view —
Is too good to be true =
I would rather have seen it than not =

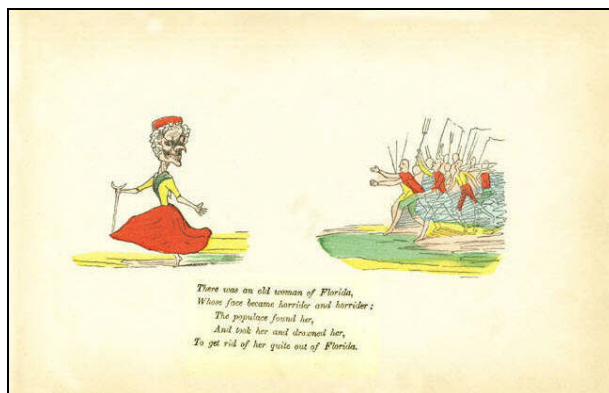
Another describes a distinctly unusual form of headgear:-

There was a young Lady of Wales,
Who wore her black hair in two tails
And a hat on her head
That was striped black and red,
And studded with ten-penny nails =

[The original punctuation is as above, for those wondering about the use of equal signs as full stops!]

There is no doubt at all that these two editions are intimately connected with one another. The 33 limericks the two books have in common have a few spelling and punctuation differences, but they are obviously from the same source.

Perhaps most intriguing of all are the illustrations. They too show the two books are intimately related, because they are so similar. The two scans included in this article show what I mean. I am certainly no expert in illustrative techniques, but it seems to me that one book has been copied from the other. The question is; which?



The above is a coloured illustration from the American edition.

More by luck than judgement I found two more copies of the English edition, which are not listed in any easily accessible bibliography. The first is in Cambridge University Library. This is listed in an old handwritten catalogue as follows:-

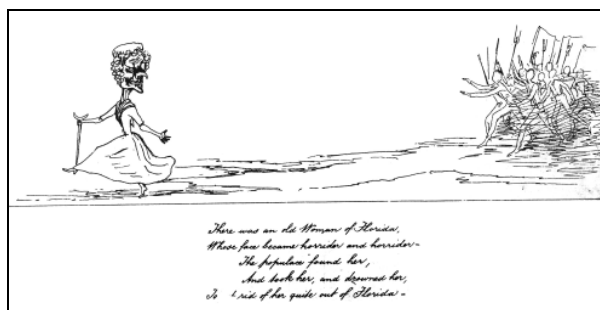
Ye Book of Sense. 1860 9 27
Torquay [c. 1860]

When I found this I was particularly excited, because CUL catalogue numbers in those days gave the date the book was published. Result! 1860! However, talking to senior cataloguers a small amount of backtracking occurred. The catalogue number was defined as the date the book was *believed* to have been published. It was further suggested that the comment in brackets reflected this, meaning circa 1860, rather than copyright 1860. CUL books often have acquisition date stamps inside them; alas, there are none in this one.

The 9, however, is a fine example of the accuracy of the cataloguer's art; it stands for 9 inches, the width of the book! Ho hum. Whilst I am on this subject, both books are landscape, the UK dimensions are 9½ by 7¾, the US 9¼ by 5¾.

The second copy of the book is in Exeter Central Library. [Exeter is a few miles north of Torquay.] This may be found at catalogue number WSL:s821/BOO, which tells us nothing whatsoever. There is no date stamp in the book. A handwritten inscription on the title page, which might have been written by a local bookseller, reads:-

Torquay printing
?Anastatic process [?1854]⁷



The above is a plain illustration from the English edition.

The three English books I have examined are identical. All seem to have been bound by a "perfect binding" technique, possibly using gutta percha. Alas, whatever was used was not perfect. In all three books every single page has fallen out (the CUL copy whilst I

⁷ Anastatic: OED: 'designating a lithographic process of printing reproductions from slightly raised metallic plates.' You knew that, didn't you?



was reading it, which was quite a traumatic experience).

I think the key to understanding the origin of the book lies in the limerick rhyme words. Many use far-away place names. There are the usual suspects, Grenada, Malta, Jerusalem, Nepal, Spain and so on. There is also a small group of towns and places local to Torquay:—

Torbay
Dawlish
Torquay
Bridgewater (English edition only)
Brent-Tor (English edition only)

Readers not possessed of a UK map can use online resources such as streetmap.co.uk. Note: the modern spelling of Bridgewater omits the middle e; thus Bridgwater.

As I can see little reason why an American writer would use these obscure names, I am of the opinion that the English edition of the book is the original. Another pointer in this direction concerns the use of a very unusual word in one of the limericks. In the English version the line reads *I've swallowed a jargonelle pear*—. In the American version the word is Gargonelle. Gargonelle is defined in the *OED* as 'An early-ripening (originally inferior) variety of pear.' Gargonelle seems not to be a word, which suggests a mistake in the copying process.

The fact that the illustrations seem to have been copied rather than being exactly the same suggests to me piracy. Why go to the trouble of making new illustrations if you are printing a book legally and presumably have access to the original plates? Until the Chace Act of 1891 it was very difficult for a foreign author to obtain any copyright protection in the US.

Now; the date! The only **fact** we have is the British Museum acquisition date stamp. This merely gives us the latest date for the English edition. Could it have been earlier than this? The English book does not contain any reference to Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense*. Its publication might have been an attempt to cash in on the inordinate popularity of Lear's book, an enlarged edition of which had been published in 1861 and which ran to several reprints in that year alone. If it was, why it did not refer to it *à la Americaine*? It could simply have been British reserve; or the threat of legal action. However, if it was published earlier than 1861, that problem is resolved.

To summarise. I believe the English edition was published before the US edition. It may have been printed around 1860, but that is speculation. It was certainly in existence in 1863. I think the US book was a pirated edition which was published after the first American publication in 1862/3⁸ of Edward Lear's

third edition of *The Book of Nonsense*. For neither the English nor American edition can I give a definite date of publication. Searching in book catalogues for the period has so far revealed nothing new. Perhaps there might be a dated review in a local paper such as the *Torquay Directory* or *Torquay Chronicle*, or one of the Philadelphia newspapers. Hope springs eternal!

Perhaps the best way to end this article is with the question posed on both English and American title pages — *Is it true, think you?*

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From Dr Bob Turvey's e-mail message:
(April 2020)

(...) when local newspapers came online and were easy to search, I looked at adverts, reviews and the like to see if I could date the pair.

I would say December, 1863, for the UK edition and October (possibly September?), 1871, for the US edition.



⁸ Information from WORLDCAT: F. A. Stokes, New York, 1862.

Willis P. Hazard, 724 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, 1863.

