

Dr. Leslie McGrath, Gentle Champion of Books, Looks Back... and Ahead



Photo credit: Linda Granfield

What were your childhood and/or teenage experiences with libraries?

My mother, Joan McGrath, was a teacher-librarian and later a library consultant with the TDSB who advocated rich and varied collections and the freedom to read. When my sister and brother and I were very young both my mother and my maternal grandmother read aloud to us. Later, I recall my mother quizzing me about a book or two considered problematic. To stop her children from reading an interesting book would not have occurred to my mother, and I think she was always gathering feedback to defend titles she considered useful.

What are some favourite books and authors from your childhood and teen years?

I found the D'Aulaires' picture books of Greek and Norse mythology beautiful, and enjoyed the Narnia tales, Tolkien's books, novels by Rosemary Sutcliff, especially *The Eagle of the Ninth*, and by Kipling, particularly *Kim*. Stories of travel and adventure were favourites, especially *Kon Tiki* and *The Voyage of the Beagle*. I loved Rachel Carson's sea books, and still do.

What did you study at university? What was the topic of your thesis?

I studied English, later completing a Master's degree in library science at the University of Toronto, and then, after beginning to work at Osborne, a Ph.D. in Information Studies, and in the collaborative program in Book History and Print Culture. My thesis was "Service to Children in the Toronto Public Library: A Case Study, 1912–1949." The advanced degree has been extremely useful in helping researchers make use of Osborne resources.

What led you to library studies?

The opportunity to connect people and books led me to be a librarian. Reading is one of the most valuable activities I know, and certainly one of the most enjoyable. We can help all people with their information needs, which is a form of egalitarian service and empowerment I find most attractive.

How long have you been with the Osborne and what was your initial position?

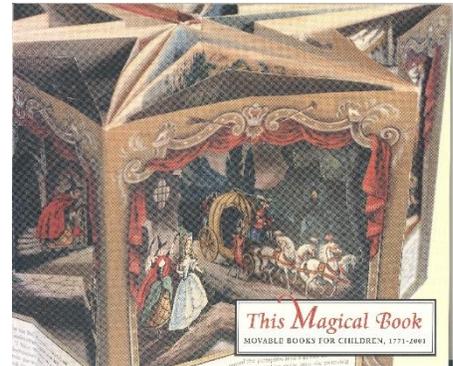
I started as “Head, Osborne Collection” in 1995, and while the title has changed several times (I was never permitted to call myself a “curator,” which, given the diversity of materials at Osborne, always seemed the most logical description), the job itself did not change.

What are your favourite books and/or objects in the collection? Why?

There are so many beautiful and curious books that it is hard to pick favourites. Some have given such pleasure to visitors they instantly come to mind: the Silvia Cole manuscript, the world’s smallest book, the Lewis Carroll books illustrated by George Walker, and those by Tenniel are just a few. The archives donated by many generous authors and illustrators are now coming into their own, especially with the Groundwood Archives donated by Patsy Aldana. These are unique and offer extraordinary insights. I also love ephemera. Though Osborne has acquired many intriguing pieces of ephemera over the years, the extensive donation of children’s advertising booklets, greeting cards, calendars, and novelties, many based on famous stories and nursery rhymes, made by Judith Dawson last year, is a favourite. Ephemera adds excitement to displays and discussions, enhancing more traditional formats, by showing the popular appeal of classical stories.

Of the exhibitions you’ve organized at Osborne, which did you enjoy most? Why?

“Land of the Silver Birch” (1996) is an old favourite, because it was my first exhibit, and “This Magical Book” (2002), because the Friends kindly sponsored a catalogue and because the movable books are such fun. My colleagues have created wonderful and highly successful exhibits. Martha Scott’s “When Cinderella Went to the Ball” (2009) was among the most beautiful, and Elizabeth Derbecker’s “Lest We Forget” (2014) was among the most touching and historically informative. The Friends sponsored print catalogues for both of these, creating valuable records of the research behind the exhibits and the items shown in them.



What has been the most memorable experience from your time at Osborne?

Countless memorable experiences with patrons and grateful users fascinated with parts of the collection have given me great happiness. Visits by influential people have brought valuable attention to the books and to what we do, such as the visit of J. K. Rowling in 2000, which was an extraordinary event brought about by our Sendak gryphon. I had written to invite J. K. Rowling to visit and give a lecture at Osborne, not even expecting a reply, but apparently the gryphon on the letterhead caught her eye and inspired an acceptance. This celebrated visit became a citywide event, but the trip to Osborne was included, and we spent a lovely hour in the stacks. Before leaving, she signed the visitor’s book with a flourish and a sketch of the Hogwarts “Sorting Hat.” To our great delight we were honoured by a visit of Her Majesty Michiko, Empress of Japan, in 2009. Her Majesty has been involved with IBBY International and is an authority on children’s books; this visit celebrated the long and distinguished connection between the Osborne Collection and our many Friends members in Japan.

What did you most enjoy about school and/or international groups' visits?

I like creating excitement and historical awareness in audiences. The stories in children's literature come from a worldwide "cauldron of story," and making students of every background aware that their cultures have contributed to stories known and loved today builds understanding and appreciation. Osborne is the most multicultural of all Special Collections and it is a great pleasure to help students contextualize their own literary experiences through its holdings.

What are your favourite bookstores in Toronto and farther afield?

Every store selling old books has something fine to offer. I have never set foot in some wonderful stores abroad, yet have made some very fine acquisitions through scholarly catalogues. One of the privileges of the job has been meeting some of the most knowledgeable and generous people in the field: Hugh Anson-Cartwright, David Mason, Megan Webster, and Justin Schiller, to name but a few.

Do you like to travel and if so, where/what are your favourite spots?

Visiting Oxford University, Cambridge, and Princeton in early years at Osborne were wonderful opportunities provided by the Friends, as was the trip to New York two years ago. I have enjoyed short scuba trips to Cuba, Honduras, and Mexico, and hope to go again.

Do you think you'll remain involved with Osborne after your retirement?

If I can be of service, I certainly will. I was fortunate in meeting all the previous heads of Osborne, from Sheila Egoff, who with William Toye came to visit when Osborne had just opened in its new location (and I still remember their cheerful advice, "Bone up!"), Judith St. John, a dear friend and collaborator in my library history studies, and last but not least, Margaret Maloney, who has always risen to assist with every request. I would be pleased to help in turn, especially the Friends who have always been so generous with their support.

What are your plans for the first days of your retirement?

I will teach a session of the University of Toronto iSchool's Rare Books and Manuscripts course. This will be the fourth time I have taught the course, and I enjoy it very much.

Do you collect books or book-related ephemera personally?

We have a lot of books at home, and the collection is strong in children's books, book history, and oceanography. For a particular collection, though, I collect tracts. I always have, from the first tract that came my way—left in a phone booth, I think. When I come in to work and find a dear colleague (usually Liz) has propped a new tract on my computer I am always cheered. There is something so *earnest* about them.

Bonus question! Your favourite or most remembered quote from children's literature?

"This is not a toy, Mr. Elephant. You must get out and do your shopping. Look, here is the floorwalker." —Jean de Brunhoff, *The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant* (1933)

Chandra Wohleber, longtime Friends volunteer, interviewed Leslie McGrath in December 2017, a few weeks before her retirement.

Accolades for Dr. Leslie McGrath

What a joy it has been to work with Leslie, not only as a bookseller, and a valuer of donations to Osborne, but also as a Friend to observe how she has encouraged her loyal staff to present so many memorable exhibitions. No wonder that so many book collectors, authors and artists are proud to donate their treasures to Leslie's wise and loving care. Surely Lillian Smith must be smiling proudly now as she sees how Leslie, with her Doctorate in Library Science, has enhanced Osborne's worldwide reputation. How I wish I could take credit for hiring Leslie twenty-two years ago! All of your friends are sad to see you leave, but we know that you will surprise us with new contributions to your beloved world of Children's Literature.

-- *Hugh Anson-Cartwright, antiquarian bookseller*

As an antiquarian bookseller, I have enjoyed my dealings with the past three curators of the Osborne Collection: Judith St John, Margaret Maloney, and now Leslie McGrath. It seems remarkable that Leslie has been at Osborne for the past twenty-two years. We first met when she attended my course on Children's Books at Rare Book School in Charlottesville, 1993. Her modesty is perhaps her most remarkable feature, aside from having quickly learnt the inner workings of English language children's books from its earliest period. All who have worked with her will miss her quiet ways. Through her efforts, the legacy left by Edgar Osborne has continued, supported by the additions of other collections developed by her and her predecessors to fill out a broader scope of books for children.

-- *Justin Schiller, antiquarian bookseller*

"I will have your boxes ready, and a nice short appetizer"; "I will just show off a few treasures." That's Leslie, preparing an archival feast for my classes' visits to Osborne. "What an awesome lady," one of my students remarked in a hushed voice, as she contemplated the original art of one of Ian Wallace's books. In Leslie, buoyant enthusiasm and wonder mingle with a deep, precise knowledge of everything in Osborne and of children's books in general. Her curatorial hospitality effected fundamental changes in scholarship; in my case, asking her for help with articles on "children's literature and sweets" and "children's literature and cheese" for the respective *Oxford Companions* resulted in a luscious abundance of citations, references, books and pamphlets. She completely altered my understanding — and so it was with anyone who went to her for scholarly help.

-- *Deirdre Baker, author, critic and assistant professor, University of Toronto*

Leslie's presence at the Osborne Collection has always seemed such a perfect fit that it's hard to believe she won't be there. She has accomplished great things, bringing in significant gifts of books and art, nurturing relationships with donors, big and small. The amount of significant work her small staff accomplishes is nothing short of miraculous. I think the reason for her success lies in the trust she is able to build with all who know her. Anyone who has worked or studied at Osborne has encountered her depth of knowledge and her joy in sharing it. Add to that her kind and thoughtful treatment of everyone she encounters, whether it's the Empress of Japan, or a student struggling with an assignment; we've all felt that we could rely absolutely on her scholarship, her judgment, her stewardship of the collection.

-- *Sylvia Lassam, archivist and former Chair, Friends of the Osborne*