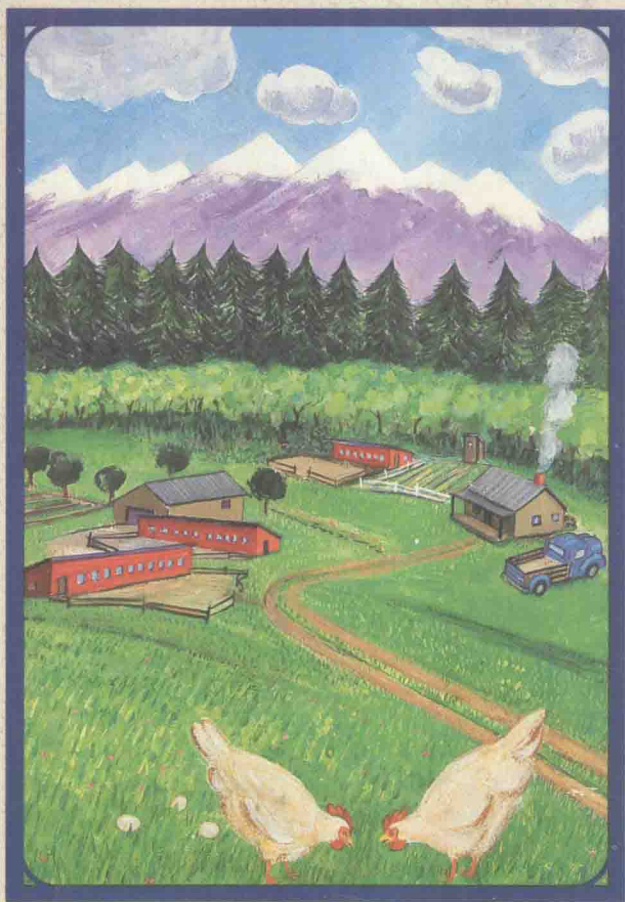


The EGG and I



Betty MacDonald

Her story is extremely funny, and the picture she paints in crisp and good humor of loneliness, endless work and the overrated rigors of the simple life is appealing. . . . *The Egg and I* is a delightful, cheerfully written story, built out of what was obviously not an altogether happy experience. . . . Mrs. MacDonald's life in the woods comes as unadulterated fun." —*Weekly Book Review*



The Egg and I

BETTY MAC DONALD



PERENNIAL LIBRARY

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London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto

TO MY SISTER MARY
who has always believed that I can
do anything she puts her mind to

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Foreword to the Paperback Edition

Betty MacDonald, our mother, is in print again. We are delighted. Her books, *The Egg and I*, *The Plague and I*, *Anybody Can Do Anything*, *Onions in the Stew*, the four “Mrs. Piggle Wiggle” books and our favorite, *Nancy and Plum*, continue to delight adults and children around the world.

Her first book, *The Egg and I*, was written in 1945, forty-two years ago, at a time when, according to some men, women weren’t supposed to be writers; they were supposed to stay at home, bake pies and have babies. If a woman was lucky enough to have a boy, she was lavished with presents and praise. If she was unlucky enough to give birth to a daughter (“It’s only a girl”), she was rewarded with a pat on the leg, a new apron and warming phrases such as “Better luck next time.” An exaggeration, we know, but it sets the scene for how unprepared we were for a woman—Betty MacDonald, our mother—becoming an overnight success and a best-selling author. We felt it was a wonderful dream that might be snatched away at any moment.

We lived on Vashon Island then, and at night we would sit around the fire trying to keep warm and talk about what we would do with the money if “The Book” sold 200 copies, maybe 400. Betty wanted a fireplace in every room and a big wide road down to the house so we wouldn’t have to walk the narrow, vine-covered, slug-infested trail anymore. Instead of carrying our groceries in by knapsack one and a half miles, we could have them delivered. Don MacDonald, our father, wanted to buy a case of imported Scotch, a case of Money’s mushrooms and big locks for his closets so “the girls” couldn’t get to his clothes. But *no road*—Don liked his privacy. We girls wanted

blast furnaces installed in every room of our big, drafty house and a charge account at the Vashon Pharmacy so we could buy lipstick and nail polish. And we *didn't* want privacy—we wanted “The Road.”

Two years later, *The Egg and I* was still number one on the national best-seller list. Betty got “The Road” and the fireplaces. We girls settled for radiant heat under the floors instead of blast furnaces plus the charge account at the Vashon drug store, which was to be kept under twenty-five dollars a month (which to us seemed like twenty-five hundred). Don got his case of very old, very expensive imported Scotch, his case of mushrooms and his big locks for his closet, which unfortunately for him didn't come with keys for some strange reason. Of course, he didn't know this until the locks were firmly and securely bolted in place.

Don and “The Road” was another matter. He was sure Betty's success was jeopardizing his privacy. We began to find catalogs on the kitchen table and in the bathroom with the corners of pages turned down. Things like electric fences and spikes that came out of the ground and popped tires on cars were circled and marked “send for.”

At breakfast one beautiful Saturday morning we were eating scrambled eggs—with Don's mushrooms in them—and Betty was telling Don that he had lots of privacy and that he was being a “Big Black Future” (a family expression) and that nobody knew where we lived and, besides, who would take the ferry clear over to Vashon and try to find our very hidden, very unmarked road? Practically an impossibility. Don wasn't convinced, and he had just started to respond when a baby in a stroller appeared outside the kitchen window, right in front of us. The baby had a large family behind her. They carried cameras, tapped their fingers on the window and said, “Take another bite of egg, Betty.” We laughed, Betty smiled obligingly and Don shouted, “Gawd, Betty do something!” and disappeared.

The fame had begun. Don's privacy was threatened but not destroyed. Ivan Dimitri, a *Life* magazine photographer, moved in with us for a week and took hundreds of pictures of Betty and us and Don, when he could find him. Don's voice was around more than

Don was, constantly admonishing: "Don't say that!" We called him "Don't Say That" Don.

Betty shared her fame with her whole family, all of her friends and her fans. We took trips to New York and stayed at the Algonquin Hotel. We met famous people, ate at famous restaurants, wore our mother's new designer clothes, pinned and rolled up, saw Broadway shows, went to Hollywood, met movie stars and went to nightclubs, autographings, radio interviews and public appearances. Through all this, Betty, being so shy and modest, did not understand why anyone would want to meet her, let alone hear her make a speech. She always said she was a nervous, unfunny wreck who sounded just like Donald Duck. Grand, glorious and glamorous Betty kept her feet—and ours—on the ground. Summer trips to Hollywood, but home to summer jobs; spring vacations in Chicago and New York, but home to baby-sitting and after-school jobs.

If anyone asked what was the greatest thing she enjoyed about her success, she would say, "Being recognized so you can cash a check anywhere."

When she saw in print everything from *The Dredge and I* (a dull Alaskan tome) to *The Cook and I*, *The Fish and I*, *The Quilt and I*, and on and on, her comment was, "I'd rather be copied than be the copier."

She answered all of her fan mail, most of it filed under "People Who Want." Thousands of letter-writers asked her to collaborate with them on their work, as "it would be a lot funnier," "not dirty" and "more interesting"; and they told her they would pay her, too—maybe. She replied with her always gracious out: "My agents don't allow me to do collaboration work of any kind."

Examples:

Dear Mrs. MacDonald:

I have read your books and find them very cheerful. I write better of course but more sad. Send my manuscript to your agent and publisher and I'll give you half of my earnings.

Sincerely yours,
Greta Swenson

Dear Mrs. MacDonald:

For some time I have wondered about writing a book about my experience—my beauty shoppe—for the past sixteen years I have operate my shoppe in this Creole country. I hope it would bring enough money to justify my paying you to write it.

Yours truly,
Alma Quilter

There were rude, ungracious remarks: "I didn't know you were so huge." (Betty was 5'9½".) "I didn't realize you'd be soooo fat."

We are certain that if Betty were alive today, she would address the plight of the American Indian in a much different manner. We feel that she only meant to turn what was to her a frightening situation into a lighthearted encounter. Remember, she had been brought up to be a lady—one who in those days was completely unprepared to handle the problems she dealt with so blithely in *The Egg*.

Through all of the funny, ugly, sad, painful, joyful times, she always shared with and gave to her reading public. She is still sharing through her books. The ability to laugh at herself and to make others laugh and her lovely spirit of optimism are as real today as they were then.

Betty MacDonald: a unique, loving, fascinating, funny, never dull, enormously talented mother is now in print again.

March, 1987

Anne MacDonald Evans
Joan MacDonald Keil

PART ONE

Such Duty

*Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband.*

—SHAKESPEARE

And I'll Be Happy

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 it is a wife's bounden duty to see that her husband is happy in his work. "First make sure that your husband is doing the kind of work he enjoys and is best fitted for and then cheerfully accept whatever it entails. If you marry a doctor, don't whine because he doesn't keep the hours of a shoe clerk, and by the same token if you marry a shoe clerk, don't complain because he doesn't make as much money as a doctor. Be satisfied that he works regular hours," Mother told us.

According to Mother, if your husband wants to give up the banking business and polish agates for a living, let him. Help him with his agate polishing. Learn to know and to love agates (and incidentally to eat them).

"It is depressing enough for a man to know that he has to work the rest of his life without the added burden of knowing that it will be work he hates. Too many potentially great men are eating their hearts out in dull jobs because of selfish wives." And Mother had examples too. There was the Fuller Brush man who came to our house once a month and told Mother how deliriously happy he used to be raising Siberian wolves and playing the violin with a symphony orchestra until he ran afoul of and married Myrtle. The man in the

A & P vegetable department who was lirting through life as a veterinary surgeon until he married a woman who hated animals but loved vegetables. And the numerous mining men Mother and Daddy knew who were held down to uninspiring company jobs by wives who wouldn't face the financial insecurity of their husbands going into business for themselves.

"Boy," we said, "when we get married, our husbands will do exactly as they please," and they have.

This I'll-go-where-you-go-do-what-you-do-be-what-you-are-and-I'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; but not so well for me, because although I did what she told me and let Bob choose the work in which he felt he would be happiest and then plunged wholeheartedly in with him, I wound up on the Pacific Coast in the most untamed corner of the United States, with a ten-gallon keg of good whiskey, some very dirty Indians, and hundreds and hundreds of most uninteresting chickens.

Something was wrong. Either Mother skipped a chapter or there was some great lack in me, because Bob was happy in his work but I was not. I couldn't learn to love or to know chickens or Indians and, instead of enjoying living in that vast wilderness, I kept thinking: Who am I against two and a half million acres of mountains and trees? Perhaps Mother with her flair for pioneering would have enjoyed it. Perhaps.

Where Mother got this pioneer spirit, how she came by it, I do not know, for a thorough search of the family records reveals no Daniel Boones, no wagon trains heading West with brave women slapping at Indians with their sunbonnets. In fact, our family tree appears rife with lethargy, which no doubt accounts for our all living to be eighty-seven or ninety-three.

Mother's ancestors were Dutch. Ten Eyck was their name and they settled in New York in 1613. One of my father's family names was Campbell. The Campbells came to Virginia from Scotland. They were all nice well-bred people but not daring or adventuresome except for "Gammy," my father's mother, who wore her corsets upside down and her shoes on the wrong feet and married a gambler with yellow eyes. The gambler, James Bard of Bardstown, Kentucky, took 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.

We never saw this grandfather but he influenced our lives whether he knew it or not, because Gammy was a strong believer in heredity, particularly the inheritance of bad traits, and she watched us like hawks when we were children to see if the "taint" was coming out in any of us. She hammered on my father to such an extent about his gambling blood that he would not allow us children to play cards in any form, not even Slap Jack or Old Maid, and though Mother finally forced him to learn to play double Canfield, he died without ever having played a hand of bridge, a feat which I envy heartily.

The monotony of Mother's family was not relieved in any way until she married Darsie Bard who was her brother's tutor and a *Westerner working* his way through Harvard. This was a very shocking incident as Mother's family believed that the confines of civilization ended with the boundaries of New York State and that Westerners were a lot of very vulgar people who pronounced their r's and thought they were as good as anybody. Mother's mother, whom later we were forced to call Deargrandmother, had fainting fits, spells and tantrums but to no avail. Mother went flipping off without a

backward glance, to live, for Heaven's sake, in Butte, Montana.

This was Butte in the early 1900's. The time of the Copper Kings, when everyone made a million dollars, there were thirty-five thousand miners working underground and a saloon every other doorway. Irish scrubwomen became the wives of millionaires and had interior decorators come from France to "do" their houses. Lawns were imported blade by blade and given the care of orchids in order to make them grow in that sulphur-laden air. Oriental rugs were a sign of wealth and grandeur and were put on the floors three deep and piled in heaps in attics. Southern mansions, French chaiteaus, Welsh stone cottages, timbered English houses, Swiss chalets and American bungalows were built to house the rich Irish. Everyone was cordial, bluff and gay and entertained lavishly and all the time. A party was given at the Silver Bow Club to welcome Mother to Butte and she was amazed to find that the ladies of the town wore Paris gowns but painted their faces like prostitutes. Mother had been reared to believe that if you were unfortunate enough to be born with a pale green face, you, if you were a lady, would not for a moment entertain the thought of rouge, but would accept your color as your cross and do nice things for poor people. Mother had been reared this way but she didn't endorse such nonsense. Fortunately she had natural colors so she wasn't put to any test, but she was certainly pleased to find that the ladies of Butte, and there were many ladies in the strictest sense of the word, had kicked over the traces from Boston to Atlanta and were improving on nature with everything they could lay hand to. Mother loved the West and she loved Westerners.

My sister Mary was born in Butte. She had red hair and to appease Mother's family was given the middle name of Ten Eyck which necessitated her fighting her way through gram-

mar school to the taunts of Mary Tin Neck.

When Mary was less than a year old my father was sent down to the Nevada desert to examine gold property. Mother joyfully went with him and lived in a shack and rode horseback with the baby on the saddle in front of her. Both Mother and Daddy were happy in his work.{

I was born in Boulder, Colorado. Gammy was with us then and the night I was born, when Mother began having pains, she called to Gammy (Daddy was away on a mining trip) and told her to phone for the doctor and nurse. But Gammy, prompted by the same inner urge which made her wear her corsets upside down, rushed across the street and pounded on the door of a veterinary and when he appeared, she dragged him bewildered and in his long underwear to Mother's bedside. Mother, very calm, sent the poor man home, but because of the delay and confusion I was born before the doctor could get there and it was necessary for Gammy to tie and cut the umbilical cord. This was very unfortunate, as Gammy, a Southern girl, had been "delicately reared" and her knowledge of rudimentary anatomy could have been put in the eye of a needle. She thought the cord had to be tied into a knot and so grabbing me like the frayed end of a rope, she began looping me through and under as she attempted the knot. The upshot was that Mother sat up and tied and cut the cord herself and I was named for Gammy and became another in a long line of Anne Elizabeth Campbells. My hair was snow white but later turned red.

When I was a few months old Mother received the following wire from Daddy: "Leaving for Mexico City for two years Thursday—be ready if you want to come along." This was Monday. Mother wired: "Will be ready" and she was; and Thursday morning, we all, including Gammy, left for Mexico.

Díaz was serving his last term as president of Mexico then, and Mexico City was a delightful place of Mexicans, flowers and beautiful horses. My sister, Mary, because of her brilliant red hair, was much admired by the Mexicans and learned to speak fluent Spanish, but I, an outstanding dullard, didn't even begin to speak anything until almost three. There was a series of violent earthquakes while we were in Mexico but Mother, never one to become hysterical, inquired as to earthquake procedure, and when the lamps began to describe arcs in the air, the mirrors to sway and the walls to buckle, Mother sensibly herded Mary, Gammy and me into the doorway of the apartment, where the building structure was supposed to be strongest and, though the apartment building was cracked from top to bottom, we were all unharmed. A woman in the next apartment became very excited and rushed into the street in her nightgown, where, I am happy to relate, a water main burst directly under her.

From Mexico we moved to Placerville, Idaho, a mining camp in the mountains near Boise, where the snow was fifteen feet deep on the level in winter and Mother bought a year's supply of food at a time. Our closest neighbor was a kind woman who had been a very successful prostitute in Alaska and wore a chain of large gold nuggets which reached below her knees. She was very fond of me, Mother says, and told everyone, to Gammy's intense annoyance, that I was the "spitting image" of her when she was three years old. In Placerville, Mrs. Wooster (I believe that this was her name) had become a respectable married woman but evidently this palled, for Mother says she talked constantly of the "good old days." I can feel for her because, although I have never been an Alaskan prostitute dancing on the bar in a spangled dress, I still got very bored with washing and ironing and dish-washing and cooking day after relentless day. Of course Mrs.