

The Quill



In celebration of the life and work of
Kate Douglas Wiggin (1856-1923)

Number 2

WINTER 2005

Welcome! to the second news-sheet in honour of American author Kate Douglas Wiggin. Whether you are an academic, a collector or 'just' an enthusiastic fan of Kate's many books, we aim to bring you items of literary interest from both sides of the Atlantic, as well as up-to-date news from 'Quillcote', her former home in Hollis, Maine. For the next year or so, this will be a free news-sheet available for the price of a sae; we hope to expand as we get an idea of how much interest there is out there and to found an official Kate Douglas Wiggin Society to coincide with her 150th birthday in 2006. Wiggin, like many female authors of her era, has been neglected in recent years, which is a shame, because their writing reflects a fascinating era when women's lives were changing as a result of advancing technology, better transportation and new career opportunities - our grandmothers' and great-grandmothers' generation, and part of our own social history!

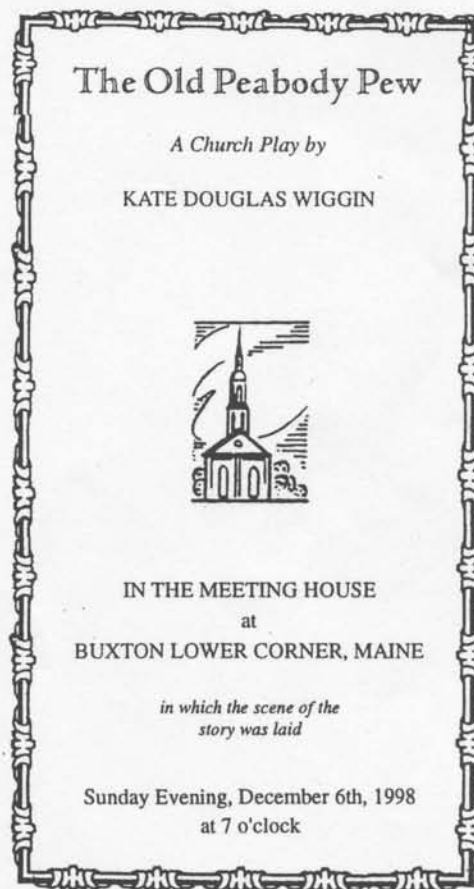
Rowena Edlin-White & Carla Baade Turner

The Old Peabody Pew

Published in 1907, and subtitled, "A Christmas Romance of a Country Church", *The Old Peabody Pew* enjoyed a double success: first as a seasonal novella and second as a play which is still performed today. It celebrates women's fellowship and determination in "Edgewood", a village on the Saco, which, like many of Wiggin's rural stories, is an amalgam of Hollis, Salmon Falls, Buxton and all those little places the author knew so well, and represented for her a predominantly female society of widows and spinsters whose sons and erstwhile lovers had migrated to the cities for work.

Most of the story takes place in Tory Hill church which is a real place. The ladies of the Dorcas Society have come to clean up the church and save money - the Elders may pontificate forever about affairs, but the women just get on with it! Among

them is a younger woman, Nancy, who elects to clean the Peabody pew, because there are no members of the family left to do it - apart from Justin Peabody, with whom she had an "understanding", who left years before, promising to return to her "when his luck changed". The story is slight but full of good humour. Justin does return, drawn back to Edgewood just as he is, having achieved little, and with nothing to offer Nancy but himself - which is all she required in the first place.



In 1916, Wiggin made the *Peabody Pew* into a play to be performed in the church, which is its background, as a fund-raiser. The script appeared in *The Ladies' Home Journal* for February 1917, with gracious permission for groups to perform it free of charge. By reducing the cast to eight women and one man, Wiggin was able to expand some of her more colourful characters, like Lobelia Brewster "who is no lover of men" and the Widow Buzzell who is

"willing to take a second risk". The use of a Narrator to fill in the background, enables the entire play to take place in the church. Wiggin played the Narrator until her death, when her sister, Nora Archibald Smith, took over.

The play is still performed at Tory Hill annually, in December, by a dedicated band of thespians, some of whom have played the same part for years. The current Nancy and Justin are Lynn and Tim Cook.

The play script was published by Samuel French Ltd, and there are several editions of *The Old Peabody Pew*.



"Aunt Celia" by Charles E. Brock

Somewhere to Visit...

You could do worse, whilst on holiday in England, than to go armed with Kate's first British novel, *A Cathedral Courtship* (and I suggest you take the later, expanded edition, of 1901, which has more cathedrals in it). Then you can check out the opinion of young Kitty Schuyler (and Kate herself?) as she is dragged around them all by her determined Aunt Celia. It is almost certain that Kate visited all these cathedrals, as a good tourist should. She spent a couple of nights in **Lincoln** during her first visit to Britain in July 1890, and recorded it in her Journal; she attended a "beautiful vespers service", noticing particularly the "young vicars or canons" who knelt "looking like Raphael's

cherubs"! Kate stayed near the Cathedral with a Miss Brown at 3 Castle Hill, opposite The Black Boy Inn (called "a beastly little hole" by Jack in C.C.!) The house is now a shop for the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust. Later, she took a landau from the White Hart Hotel, nearby, and drove out to Riseholme Park which is currently owned by the University of Lincoln. There she viewed the church and drove back along the Nettleham Road, counting the many inns along the way. Next morning she visited the Castle and grounds. She called the town "dear unequalled Lincoln".



And by the way...

Research into a particular author tends to lead one down all kinds of avenues and often to discover other authors to enjoy. Kate's friendship with the Findlater sisters and Charlotte Stewart, with whom she wrote *The Affair at the Inn* and *Robinetta*, got me reading their other books with much pleasure.

I happened to read in a bibliography that Kate wrote a Preface for a book called *Concerning Paul and Fiametta* (Murray, 1906) by **L. Allen Harker**. This was an unusual thing for her to do, so I sent for a copy. Wiggin describes in the Preface how she chanced on Harker's first book, *A Romance of the Nursery*, while in England, loved it, and offered to lend some weight to the author's sales in America. Of course I had to get that book too, and I can understand how it appealed to Kate. The narrator of both books is a girl called Janey but the real heroine is ten-year-old Fiametta, an eccentric, forthright child with not a little of Rebecca about her. The result of my enquiry, is that I am now working my way through all Harker's book! So far I have been able to find out little about Lizzie Allen Harker (nee Watson) apart from approximate dates - 1863-1933 and that she lived in the Cotswolds region of middle England. Any further information gratefully received! **REW**

The Forerom Rug

One of Kate's short stories, *The Forerom Rug*, has been republished in Britain in the *Woolgatherings* series. Diadema Bascom hooks a new rug for her best room from the precious remains of her childhood clothes, wedding dress and other remnants. Whilst she does so she tells her life story to her lodger, Miss Hollis. A moving story which Kate used to perform as a monologue. The description of the rug is so detailed, we were able to produce a pattern (it turned out to be a standard design spookily named, "Nottingham") and the instructions to make it. So! Read the story and hook your own! Costs £3 inc. p&p in UK or \$8 in USA (may be sent as cash dollars at own risk) from Rowena - see address below.

What next? Contact us!

If you would like to receive the next free newsletter(s), please send up to 3 stamped addressed envelopes to:

In USA: c/o Carla Turner, Quillcote, 20 Salmon Falls Rd, Hollis Center, Maine 04042.

In UK: c/o Rowena Edlin-White, Willow House, 11 Frederick Ave, Carlton, Nottingham NG4 1HP.

(Do send your comments, letters, anecdotes and requests to either of the above!)

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