There’s another children’s book show at San Francisco Public Library (through March 10th 2013), but this is the first since 1986 to draw on the library’s own superb resource: the George M. Fox Collection of Children’s Books.

The collecting of children’s books is a relatively modern phenomenon. There are great collections at Princeton (Cotsen Collection), in Toronto (Osborne Collection), Oxford (Opie Collection), UCLA, NYPL (Schatzki Collection) and in Florida (the Baldwin Library), that I know of, but the Fox Collection is remarkable, not only for its breadth but also for the condition of the books.

George Fox Sr was an executive at Milton Bradley and when they acquired the publishing firm of McLoughlin Brothers of New York, they didn’t want the firm’s archives and decided to dump them. Fox & another executive split them. The archives contained file copies of all their publications including a large cache of books by British publishers that were sent to them for consideration for republishing (or they may have been acquired to see what the competition was up to and ultimately to pirate them). They also contained the original woodblocks for some books as well as related ephemera. The original artwork that survived is at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester,
Mass. Fox added to the collection and gave over 2000 children’s books to the library in 1978. The current exhibition (the first since 1978) features over eighty examples of 19th-century color printing, especially color wood engraving and chromolithographs. Early hand-colored images are included as well. Highlights include “toy” and “moveable” books; work from the shop of Edmund Evans (who published all of Kate Greenaway’s works) and many examples of fine British chromolithography from the firms of Thomas Nelson & Sons, Frederick Warne, Dean & Son and George Routledge & Sons.

McLoughlin Brothers’ motto “Educate and Amuse” marks an important turning point because, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, children’s books tended to be rather tedious and more about indoctrinating kids in good behavior than having fun. Catherine Sinclair’s Holiday House, 1839, is generally considered the first book written for children that does not have a built-in guilt-trip.

Tastes change over time also. The British books in the collection are sometimes marked up with alterations for the American market, or editorial comments. The Little Pig’s Ramble from Home, which is a personal favorite, has “Not much liked, very ordinary,” penciled on it. This is one of the titles that has survived elsewhere too and the Baldwin copy can be read on line at the childrenslibrary.org. In The Little Pig’s Ramble, Jack Pig puts on airs (a wig and top hat) and sets off to explore the world, only to be confronted with a pork butcher! Moral: Stay home if you know what’s good for you!

The books were often published in uniform series like “Uncle Buncle’s” or “Grandmama Easy’s” and if the title was well-known it might generate sequels, as Ruth McGurk pointed out in her essay on the Fox Collection: “They are shameless in putting out sequels The Cock Robin story is spun into The Sad Fate of Cock Robin, Sick Robin and his Kind, Nurse Jenny Wren, Death & Burial of Cock Robin, Cock Robin Alive & Well Again and Mrs Dove’s Party. In the latter the guilty sparrow is punished by social ostracism. And though he hopped in quite bold and undaunted, He found not a bird that in kindness would greet him.”

Not on display is a personal favorite: the giant hen in *Learning to Count: One, Two, Buckle my Shoe* (by Augustus Hoppin, New York, Hurd & Houghton, ca 1870), but it is in the collection should you choose to explore it.
The books were advertised as cheap, colorful (some printed in ten colors) and above all avoiding vulgar sentiments. The big guns of children’s book illustration, Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway and Walter Crane emerged in the late Victorian era and are well-represented in the collection. There’s even a Caldecott sketch “in the style of Greenaway.” As McGurk pointed out, “Walter Crane has a bent for whimsical detail.” She points out the Wedgwood bowls in the Three Bears rather luxe kitchen, labeled “Ursus Major, Ursus Minor, and Ursus Minimus”! Caldecott also wrote to Scribner’s (who legally imported his books) complaining about the garish colors in the pirated editions of his books from McLoughlin and warning readers not to accept the cheap knock-offs.
Short but sweet, *Four Footed Favourites* by Mrs Surr, published by Nelson & Sons in London, and illustrated by Hector Giacomelli, appeared in the 1880s. The recently digitized SFPL copy can be read on the [Internet Archive](https://archive.org) site.

The SFPL copy of *Comic Insects* is also found [there](https://archive.org). It has anthropomorphism reminiscent of Tenniel’s Caterpillar in *Alice* (and of course Grandville), but above all it has spectacular color printing from chromolithography, including gold ([above](https://archive.org), which is very tricky to achieve). Published by Frederick Warne, ca 1872, it was written by the Rev F A S Reid, illustrated by Berry F Berry, engraved by Dalziel Brothers and printed from plates made by Kronheim & Co.
Aunt Louisa’s *Magic Modeller* (London: Frederick Warne & Co., ca 1881) is a paper toy you cut out to build a replica of the Tower of London. These paper toys were very popular in France & Germany also and make the child a participant in the project rather than a proprietor.

More elaborate toy books include *Six Mysterious Pictures from Chaos: affording great amusement and intense surprise among children and their little friends* (London: Dean & Sons, ca 1878). Such moveable books inspired the Surrealists in their game of Exquisite Corpse. The show is edifying, and also amusing.

Laura E. Wasowicz, Curator of Children’s Literature from the American Antiquarian Society, will discuss the history of McLoughlin Brothers (1858–1950), and their role as producers of color picture books in America. The lecture will be held in the Koret Auditorium of the Main Library, on Saturday, January 5th, 2013 at 2 p.m.  