

A FAIRY'S GARLAND OF B.C. FLOWERS:

DOROTHEA ALLISON AND JANET MIDDLETON

by *Phyllis Reeve*

AMONG MY ACCIDENTAL TREASURES I count three little books, published in Vernon, B.C. in the 1940s. They belonged to a family friend, Mabel Johnson, who, like the creator of the books, was devoted to the promotion of Okanagan natural history. In 1912 a young English woman named Dorothea Scott-Coward arrived in the Okanagan Valley to visit a sick cousin. The cousin returned to England in 1913, but without Dorothea. She taught school for a year, fell in love with and married an orchard farmer, Robert Allison, and lived in the Okanagan until her death in 1981, at the age of 103.

She exchanged her teaching career for a citizen's lifelong commitment to the education of rural children, serving repeated terms as a School Trustee. In 1944 she collected and arranged *Songs of Kalamalka*, published in Oyama, B.C., printed by the Vernon News Ltd. on paper now inevitably yellowing, 17.5 cm, 27 pages, the cover and title page embellished with an anonymous artist's line drawings of lake, hills and pine needles. Various authors, none of them now famous, contributed poems with titles such as *The Lake of Many Colours* and *Early Days of Fruit Growing*. All profits were "handed over to the Red Cross."

My copy is inscribed by the author to: "Mrs. Johnson with happy memories of your interest in this little enterprise." The circle of interested Okanagan devotees to which Mrs. Allison and Mrs. Johnson belonged included Anthony Walsh, teacher of aboriginal children at the Inkameep Day School in Oliver, B.C. from 1931-43, and an advocate of education through creativity. In a foreword to *Songs of Kalamalka*, Walsh wrote: "We are indebted to Mrs. Allison for the gathering of these verses. If such undertakings were carried out across the whole Dominion, for the encouragement of plays, songs, and music, descriptive of the people and the lives they live, it would not be long before there would be a flowering of the Arts and a development of culture, truly worthy of Canada."

Mrs. Allison's second compilation, *Merry Bells or Tales of the Okanagan Fairies*, Oyama, B.C., Oct. 15, 1945, presented six short stories with a botanical theme, including *The Patch of Buttercups* by Mabel Johnson, and four woodcuts by another Vernon grande dame, Miss Jessie Topham Brown. *Merry Bells*, 21 cm, 25 pages, was also printed by the Vernon News Limited.

Dorothea Allison herself wrote the text for the third book and the masterpiece among the three, *A Fairy's Garland of B.C. flowers*. Bearing the

same Vernon imprint, but no place or year of publication, it too dates from the mid-1940s, according to the best memories of the artist. She is identified only as “Janet,” but the truncated signature on the *Garland’s* woodcuts matched that of Janet Middleton on our two little silkscreens of Silver Star Mountain near Vernon and “Castle Eisenhower” near Banff.

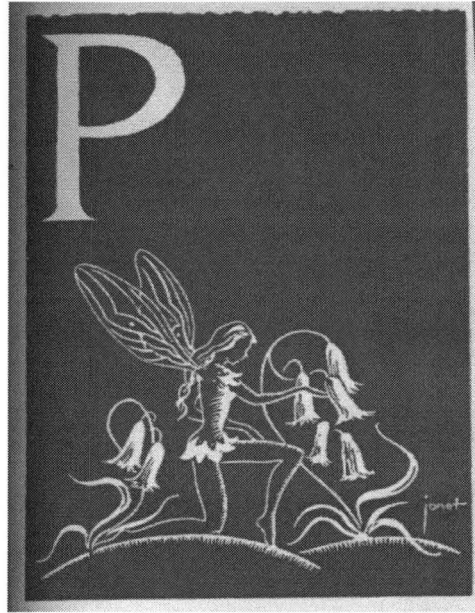
Many years ago I visited her Okanagan studio. A little later, when I found more of her work in Barkerville, she was “Holly Middleton.” She now lives in Banff, still painting and exhibiting. When I contacted her, through the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, and asked her about the *Garland*, she commented, “It was a lot of work.”

And so it must have been – for a very young artist beginning her career, for an amateur author with a purpose, and for a small-town newspaper printer functioning as a literary press. But they produced a piece of book art. In the first place, it is truly a book, unlike the first two which could be classed as pamphlets. It has a real binding, with real boards and end papers, and stitching rather than staples. At 23 cm, it is only slightly larger than *Merry Bells*, but more than twice as thick.

“The happy children of our B.C. fairyland” share the dedication with “grown-ups who love flowers” and fairies, and with Mrs. Helena Parham of Vaseux Lake. Helena and Edward Parham, and Edward’s brother and sister, Harry and Esther were major members of the Penticton section of the Okanagan natural history circle. Harry Parham’s book *A Nature Lover in British Columbia* (London, 1937) remains a source for such works as the Cannings brothers’ *Birds of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia* (1987). I regret that Harry and my father failed in their attempt to trace their shared surname and shared interests to proof of shared family. They decided to assume cousinship nonetheless; hence, his book became another treasure for our library.

Determined to educate “the happy children” as painlessly as possible, Dorothea Allison planned a book from which they could simultaneously learn their botany, reinforce their ABCs, and enjoy rhymes and pictures. She wrote a brief verse for each flower, including the botanical facts “for the interest of grown-ups.” Facing each verse, Janet Middleton created a full-page woodcut illustrating the plant and its lithe-limbed fairy.

In involving fairies in botanical education, Mrs. Allison followed the example of Cecily Mary Barker’s immensely popular flower Fairy books which have been in print since 1926. But Middleton’s woodcuts



are very different from Barker's "magic" realism [pun intended]. Barker crammed her paintings with detailed growth and realistic habitat. Middleton focused her elegant drawings on the plant's essential lines and the matching capital letter. Her lithe-limbed fairies nearly merge with the foliage.

With the exception of the title page and the Good Fairy's entrance and farewell, lines are white on coloured backgrounds. Deep blues, rose, violet, green and orange have aged better than pastels. I am not sure that age is the problem; white on yellow may never have made a successful contrast.

The alphabet format limited botanical scope. Mrs. Allison explained, "it was not easy to find a flower to fit every letter; but on the other hand, it was sometimes hard to decide between several flowers, all beginning with the same letter! And so it happened that many little favourites were regretfully left out." Nevertheless, she and "Janet" described and illustrated twenty-six plants, from Aster, Buttercup and Columbine, to Xanthium, Yellowbells and Zygadena.

Phyllis Reeve is a frequent book reviewer for Amphora. We are indebted to Holly Middleton for permission to reproduce and re-enjoy her garland of woodcuts.