

Historians' meeting 31 March 2023

Danny Wells: 'The Golden Age of Children's Picture Books and Nursery Rhymes'

The 'Golden Age of Children's Literature' began with the first publication of Nursery Rhymes in 1842, according to the speaker Danny Wells. Although light-hearted and humorous, a darker message was often conveyed.

For instance, 'The Frog who would a-wooing go' depicted Charles II who fathered 14 illegitimate children. 'I had a little nut tree' portrayed Catherine of Aragon's inability to produce a male heir. Humpty Dumpty was a cannon on top of a tower, which was blown up during the siege of Colchester, so it did indeed have a great fall. Live birds really were put beneath a pie crust to impress visitors as the pie was opened!

Walter Crane, Kate Greenaway and Randolph Caldecott, all born in 1845/6, were writers and illustrators and depicted children in idyllic surroundings harking back to the pre-industrial age. The children were clean and happy in gardens full of flowers and sunshine, making their books enjoyable to read and to see.

As the century progressed, more realistic stories of children were produced by Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley.

By the end of the 19th century there were adventure books for children such as Treasure Island, The Wind in the Willows, The Secret Garden and Peter Pan, to name a few.

It was a very interesting and thought-provoking talk.