



Authorgraph No 189: Beatrix Potter

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Beatrix Potter is assessed by Judy Taylor.

Beatrix Potter assessed by **Judy Taylor**

?I don?t know what to write to you, so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits whose names were ? Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter.?

So begins the letter sent from Scotland by twenty-seven-year-old Beatrix Potter in 1901 to a frequently ailing five-year-old boy, Noel Moore, the oldest of the eight children of her once-governess and companion, Annie Carter Moore. With the substitution of ?Once upon a time there were? for the first sixteen words above, this must surely be the most well-known and most loved opening of all children?s books. The rest of the letter, until Beatrix expresses her wish to visit young Noel on her return to London, is word-for-word the text of **The Tale of Peter Rabbit**.

Like so many of the letters Beatrix Potter sent to children, Noel?s was filled with sketches, these ones instantly identifiable with the finished black-and-white pictures she drew that same year for her own privately published edition of the book, the ones she later redrew and painted in colour as illustrations for the first Warne edition in 1902.

Beatrix Potter?s life story has been told many times, and for each version a further myth is added. One current on-line version states that Beatrix kept small animals ?taking them from the wild and contributing to their deaths by disregarding their needs?. Another says that she didn?t like children ? but then that was a story told by one of the children who used to ?scrum? the apples from her orchard!

The facts are that Helen Beatrix Potter was born on 28 July 1866, the first child of Rupert and Helen Potter, then living in a newly built terraced house in London, No. 2 Bolton Gardens, South Kensington, having moved there from fashionable Harley Street. In 1854 Rupert Potter had come to London to study law at Lincoln?s Inn. Although his Unitarian family owned a flourishing calico printing works in Glossop, near Manchester, and Rupert had been expected to join the family business, he had set his heart on becoming a barrister and was called to the Bar in 1857. Six years later he married Helen Leech, who was also from the North, from a ship-building, Unitarian family, and now the couple were making a considerable effort to lose their Northern accents and to be accepted into the social life of London. To avoid confusion with her mother, their first child was known as Beatrix, or sometimes just as ?B?. She was looked after by servants and later taught by governesses, only seeing her parents to say goodnight or on special occasions.

Beatrix was a lonely child, having to rely on her own creative talents for entertainment, but she was kept well supplied with books and encouraged in her art by her parents, who both painted and drew a little themselves. When Beatrix was nearly six her brother, Walter Bertram, was born and was also called by his second name, this time to avoid confusion with his uncle.

As Bertram grew up he became a close companion to his sister and also developed a talent for painting and drawing. Together they kept a series of pets in the schoolroom or in hutches in the garden - a rabbit, a hedgehog, a mouse, a white

rat, and some bats ? all smuggled home from local pet shops. During the long family summer holidays in Scotland both children painted and drew all aspects of the flora and fauna they encountered on their countryside expeditions.

When Bertram was eleven he was sent away to boarding school but Beatrix remained in London with yet another governess. However, she was now regularly visiting the South Kensington Museum and there she discovered not only the paintings of great artists such as Constable, Gainsborough and Hogarth but the preserved skeletons of animals and samples of insects, all of which she copied and drew. She was acquiring the detailed knowledge that would later mark her as a distinguished and knowledgeable naturalist, even having a paper ?On the Germination of the Spores of *Agaricineae*? accepted in 1897 by The Linnean Society ? although she could not read it, as ladies were not allowed to attend the Society?s meetings.

Between the ages of fifteen and thirty-one Beatrix kept a journal (written in a code that was not deciphered until 1958) and it is **The Journal** that has provided us with much of our knowledge about her life in those early years. In 1882, when the family holidays moved from Scotland to the Lake District, Beatrix fell in love with that part of the world where she would live thirty years later and with which she is identified today.

It was Beatrix?s last governess, Annie Moore, who had suggested that the stories she had told in her pictures letters to the children ?might make good books? and in 1901 Beatrix published privately her own edition of **The Tale of Peter Rabbit**. When she finally found a commercial publisher for it in 1902 (after at least six attempts), it was Frederick Warne who requested that she redo her illustrations in colour. The following year Warne published **The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin** and **The Tailor of Gloucester**, both of which Beatrix had first told in letters to the Moore children. And so the publication of her stories continued, two ? and sometimes three ? little books a year, until there was a grand total of twenty-three.

As early as 1903 Beatrix had made a Peter Rabbit doll and registered it herself at the Patent Office. It would be the first of a whole host of ensuing ?spin-offs?, from painting books to board games, from hot-water-bottles to china tea-sets.

In July 1905 Beatrix received an offer of marriage from her publisher, Norman Warne, and against her parents? wishes ? for he was ?in trade? ? she accepted his proposal, but sadly the wedding was not to be, for Norman died of leukaemia only four weeks later, at the age of only thirty-seven.

It was in November of that same year that Beatrix bought a small working farm in Near Sawrey in the place she had come to love so much, the Lake District. She converted the farmhouse at Hill Top to provide accommodation for herself and for her farm manager and his family and she went there whenever she could get away from London. Turning forty, a whole new life was opening up before her, a situation reflected in her books, many of which are set in the area, **The Tale of Tom Kitten**, **The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck** and **The Tale of Samuel Whiskers** specifically at Hill Top.

In 1909 Beatrix bought a second farm in Near Sawrey, Castle Cottage, taking the advice of local solicitor, William Heelis, and three years later she would accept his proposal of marriage. They chose Castle Cottage to be their home and in October 1912 Beatrix Potter, author and artist, became also Mrs William Heelis, farmer and countrywoman.

Following the death of her father only a few months after her marriage and with the royalties from her books and the merchandise, Beatrix was a considerably wealthy woman. In 1919 she bought a house in nearby Windermere for her mother and that same year set up a Nursing Trust for the local villages. In 1923 she bought a vast nearby sheep farm, Troutbeck Park, and in 1930 she became one of the major supporters of the National Trust and their campaign to save the Lake District from developers. She was a prize-winner with her sheep at local agricultural shows where she was later a judge, and she was would be President-elect of The Herdwick Sheepbreeders? Association.

And Beatrix continued to write. The last of the ?little? books published in the Peter Rabbit format was **Cecily Parsley?s Nursery Rhymes** in 1922, a collection of her favourites that she had always wanted to see in print. But it was not her last book. In 1926 **The Fairy Caravan** was published for her many fans in the USA, but feeling that it was too autobiographical she forbade its publication in the UK during her lifetime, and British readers had to wait for their

edition until nine years after her death.

In 1932 her American readers again had an exclusive edition of a book by Beatrix Potter, **Sister Anne**, her version of the story of Bluebeard. For the first time she was unable to see well enough to provide her own illustrations and they were drawn by the American artist, Katharine Sturges.

Beatrix's farming life continued throughout the Second World War. Out on the fells in all weathers, she was managing vast areas of her own farmland, as well as a large estate for the National Trust, but her health was starting to fail. In a letter in September 1943 she wrote, 'If an old person of 77 continues to play these games ? well it can be done too often. I have plenty to do indoors and the little dogs are great company ? most efficient foot warmers.' She died on the evening of 22 December 1943.

It is remarkable to contemplate Beatrix Potter's gift to the world. She left her sixteen farms and her land of over 4,000 acres to the National Trust, thus ensuring that vast tracts of the Lake District are accessible today. To children throughout the world she left her little books, now so familiar to us all.

In 1980 the Beatrix Potter Society was formed to continue to research and to study the life of this extraordinary woman (beatrixpottersociety@tiscali.co.uk [3]). Her letters and her watercolours still emerge from attics or are sold from private collections, and each one adds a little more to Beatrix Potter's fascinating story. The Society now has members all over the world. International Conferences are held in the UK and the USA, with talks by specialist speakers that are published in book form as part of a considerable publishing programme.

The Society also has two important projects, **Reading Beatrix Potter**, where Members visit libraries and schools to read the **Tales** and talk about her life and work, and **Introducing Beatrix Potter** for book clubs, adult classes and other interested groups.

Beatrix Potter was a woman ahead of her time, intelligent, outspoken and extraordinarily talented. Her books will be read and her work appreciated for many years to come.

Judy Taylor was for many years Children's Books Editor at The Bodley Head. She is now an authority on Beatrix Potter and the author of a number of books about her including **Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller & Countrywoman** (Warne, 978 0 7232 4175 1, £20).

The Books

Some of Beatrix Potter's books, all published by Warne at £5.99:

The Tale of Peter Rabbit (978-0723247708)

The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin (978-0723247715)

The Tailor of Gloucester (978-0723247722)

The Tale of Tom Kitten (978-0723247777)

The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck (978-0723247784)

The Tale of Samuel Whiskers (978-0723247852)

Cecily Parsley's Nursery Rhymes (978-0723247920)

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Portrait of Beatrix Potter at Camfield Place, August 1886. Photograph by R. Potter.

Illustration from The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter

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First page of picture letter from Beatrix Potter to Noel Moore sent 4th September 1893.

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