



## Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature

Dr. Linda Lear's new biography of Beatrix Potter appeared recently, a must-read for every fan of Beatrix Potter's work. In a starred review, *Booklist* calls it "a meticulously researched and brilliantly re-created life . . . endlessly fascinating and often illuminating. It is altogether a remarkable achievement." Here is a recent interview with Linda Lear.

### **Biographers have so much material to choose from. What made you decide to focus on Beatrix Potter?**

Eight years ago I was visiting London when I stumbled on an exhibit of Beatrix Potter's fungi watercolors. I knew nothing about her skill as a botanical artist, her importance as a natural scientist, or her life as a countrywoman in the Lake District. It seemed very few others knew about this other life either, so I decided to tell her amazing story.

### **Most people know Beatrix Potter as simply a children's author and illustrator. What else would you like them to know about her?**

There are so many extraordinary facets to her life, and so much that's been neglected in the focus on her children's writing and art that it's impossible to give a short answer. Beatrix Potter came from a merchant family with artistic skills and reformist inclinations. She was the first children's storyteller to see the possibility of merchandising her literary characters, and she shrewdly patented a Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddle-duck doll, drew wallpaper friezes, designed tea-sets and handkerchiefs, even created a Peter Rabbit board game with rules, long before her publishers caught on to what a business opportunity she had laid out.

She was a talented naturalist, but born into a world that discounted the contributions of amateur scientists, especially women. She discovered how fungi reproduce, did microscopic drawings of the process, and was the first person in Great Britain to theorize the process of symbiosis between algae and fungi into a new organism. She even understood and observed the anti-bacterial properties of penicillin.

Most importantly, at a time when nature was viewed as a commodity to be exploited, Beatrix Potter had the vision and environmental understanding to preserve a unique landscape. She bequeathed more than 4000 acres to the National Trust, the largest gift of that time, and was instrumental in preserving much of what we know of the Lake District National Park today.

### **You present Beatrix's as a life in three acts. Why?**

Beatrix had a talent for reinventing herself. She was

driven by her imagination, and by a desire to do something useful with her life. When one avenue of creativity and purposefulness was closed, she found another way. So when her contributions to natural science were dismissed, she turned her earlier letters to children into books, and finally found a publisher for what became the famous Little Books that have been read by generations the world over.

Crushed when her editor/fiancé died just a month after their engagement, Beatrix bought a working farm and began a new life in the Lake District as a farmer and sheep breeder. Eventually her country life became all-consuming and led to her visionary stewardship of the land.

### **You learned that after Miss Potter became Mrs. William Heelis, she was much less interested in producing more children's books. Why?**

Beatrix was a fascinating combination of traditionalist and reformer. She always thought marriage was the "crown of a woman's life." When Norman Warne, her editor and fiancé, died in 1905 she was devastated and poured that grief into creativity in the Little Books that followed for the next decade. When William Heelis, the country solicitor who had first helped her buy property in the Lake District, asked her to marry him, she became Mrs. Heelis, farmer, sheep breeder, and countrywoman. Her life was now centered in the countryside, its farms, fells and sheep.

And she was heartily sick of rabbits. As she grew older, drawing and painting became increasingly difficult and she had enormous farms to manage and thousands of sheep and cattle to care for. She was ahead of the times in animal husbandry, and instrumental in preserving a unique breed of fell sheep, the Herdwick, in the Lake District. In 1928 she brought an immense property for the National Trust, and in her seventies personally managed it until the Trust could take it over. She actively worked to protect the unique architecture and crafts of the countryside.

### **Hill Top Farm has become a tourist mecca. How do you think Beatrix Potter would feel if she could see her legacy is playing out?**

Potter cared deeply about how she would be remembered, but never felt confident that she was taken seriously as a children's writer and illustrator. She would be endlessly gratified to see how popular her work remains, and how beloved her stories are. She would be amazed to see how her ideas of creative merchandising to extend her characters and tales for children has multiplied and expanded in to a multi-million dollar empire.

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