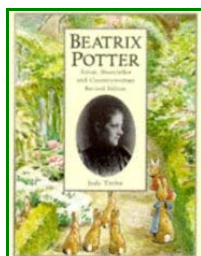


A Tale of Three Biographers

By Susan Wittig Albert

Margaret Lane wrote the first biography, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, was published in 1946, only three years after Potter's death. Lane also wrote a second book, *The Magic Years of Beatrix Potter* (1978). Lane loved the "little books," and for her, they were the crowning achievements of the artist's life. The four decades after 1913, when Miss Potter became Mrs. William Heelis, stopped writing, and took up residence in a rural village in the Lake District were for Lane a regrettable afterward, a long slide into obscurity. "The inspiration faded," Lane says sadly. For her, Potter's creative life ended when she put down her pen and her brush.

We are given a broader picture of Potter's life by her second biographer, Judy Taylor (*Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller and Countrywoman*, 1986, revised edition 1996). Taylor went farther and deeper into Potter's life story, painting a broad picture for the general reader of the emerging young artist, the talented storyteller and maker of books, the happily married wife, the serious farmer, and the dedicated preservationist. Compared to the narrow focus of Lane's work, Taylor's biography gives us a much stronger sense of the whole of Potter's life, especially those long and happy decades after her marriage, and puts the early triumphs of the charming "nursery tales" into a clearer perspective. In addition, Taylor (who has devoted much of her life to the study of Potter's work) collected a large number of unpublished letters, documents, and photographs, and through a long-term association with Potter's publisher, Frederick Warne, had access to many other documents. Her work is better documented than Lane's, which often leaves us wondering on what evidence she bases her conclusions about Potter's life.



Linda Lear takes up where Judy Taylor left off. *Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature* is the most exhaustive and rigorous examination of Potter's life to date. Lear skillfully covers the old ground—the solitary childhood, the astonishing literary success, the dutiful attention to elderly parents, the retirement to marriage and rural farming life—but she breaks a good deal of new ground, as well, taking us deep into the experience of a gifted but very private woman who, as Lear says, had a "talent for reinventing herself." A trained and experienced biographer, Lear not only tells the riveting story of a woman who led three lives, but also documents her sources. Scholars will appreciate Lear's endnotes, sources, references, and lists of primary and secondary material. This is the first time in the history of Potter scholarship that a complete documentation has been made. It is invaluable.

One of the biographer's tasks is to correct the record where it is wrong. An unfortunate legacy of Margaret Lane's work is the mistaken idea that when Potter stopped drawing imaginary animals, she stopped being creative. Both Taylor and Lear demonstrate that throughout Potter's long life, her imagination was fueled by a passion for nature. From her earliest childhood to the time of her death, as Linda Lear shows, Potter was passionately, imaginatively, and creatively engaged with life. Lear also succeeds in placing her subject in the larger context of English social and intellectual history. Given the religious, political, and social environments within which Beatrix grew up, it is easier to understand the seeming docility with which she usually (but not always!) bowed to her parents' wishes—and to applaud her courage when she breaks free.

Writing biography is an enormous challenge that requires a commitment of years, sometimes of a lifetime. In the case of Beatrix Potter, we're fortunate indeed to have three such different views. Taken together, they richly illuminate the life and work of a remarkable woman.

Hill Top Farm is concerned Beatrix wanted it to be a museum of her life and work in the countryside. She herself arranged her china and porcelain, her artwork, and her antique furniture as she wanted them to be viewed. She would be deeply gratified to know that thousands of tourists come each year to find Tom Kitten's garden and to look for Jemima Puddle-duck's missing eggs. She would be equally proud that some of the farms she donated to the National Trust offer teas for tourists, allowing them to visit the old houses and see fell farming at first hand.

But Beatrix Potter also understood that the Trust faced a precarious balancing act in preserving a unique landscape and at the same time providing for a self-sufficient agriculture. Her imaginative stewardship of the land is as much a part of her creative legacy as her art and stories for children.

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