



BEATRIX POTTER



Beatrix Potter was an extraordinary woman who led quite an ordinary life. She is most famous for her children's stories like Peter Rabbit and The Tailor of Gloucester. However, she did much more than write and illustrate charming children's stories—she was a highly accomplished artist, botanist and scientist.

Beatrix was born in 1866 in London to a well-off Victorian family and was the older of two children. The Potters were stern, over-protective parents who did not allow their children to have any friends. They also didn't take much interest in raising their own children. Beatrix was mostly raised by governesses and was left alone to entertain herself. She spent her childhood walking in the woods and bringing home plants, flowers, fungi and animals. She spent the rest of her time in her room studying these objects of nature and meticulously drawing and painting them. Every summer, the Potters vacationed in the Lake District, an area of the country that became very dear to Beatrix and whose influence is seen later in her life.

When Beatrix was six years old her brother Bertram was born and the two were inseparable. He also shared Beatrix's love of nature, and together they would study plant life and animals. Interestingly, they would even dissect deceased animals to intimately learn their skeletal system. This knowledge of the underlying structure of animals is apparent in her life-like illustrations. Beatrix would fill her sketchbooks with drawings of everything she could; she was passionate about drawing and capturing life.



Because of her proficiency in freehand drawing, perspective and flower painting she did receive an Art Student's Certificate from the Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education.

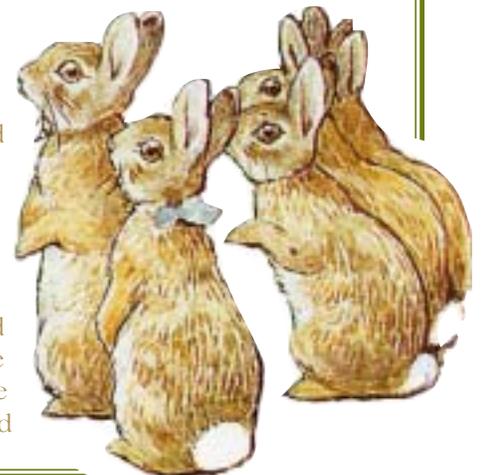
When she became a teenager she kept a diary that was written in a secret code and she continued to do this until she was thirty. In her diaries she wrote about art, politics, conversations with others and her own thoughts. This secret code took years to crack, and no one is sure why she wrote in code.

During her teenage years, she lived within walking distance from the Kensington Museum and the British Museum of Natural History. Beatrix spent countless afternoons at these museums sketching, drawing, painting and studying the plants and animals on display. This led to her keen interest in botany and mycology—the study of fungi. She made numerous detailed illustrations of various fungi, and spent a lot of time examining them under a microscope. She became highly skilled at drawing what she saw in the microscope, and she even wrote several papers on fungi where she introduced some of her own theories on fungi, plants and insects.

However, because she was a woman she was never taken seriously and thus her works never got published or were hardly looked at for that matter.

When Beatrix was in her late twenties, she would write stories about animals with simple pen and ink illustrations. She sent these tales to the children of her childhood governesses. In fact, "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" started out as a story she wrote for an invalid boy named Noel.

These stories proved to be quite successful with the children and Beatrix eventually decided to publish them. However, presumably because she was a woman, countless publishers turned her down. Being the strong woman she was, Beatrix published





the book her self in an edition of 450 copies. The book was a success, and in 1902 Frederick Warne & Co. in London bought the first color edition of the book. The book was an immediate best seller, and Warne asked Beatrix for more stories.

One of the partners with Frederick Warne & Co. was Norman Warne. He and Beatrix became quite fond of each other. After a few years of courting, Norman asked Beatrix to marry him. Beatrix's parents, however, didn't approve. Despite their controlling disapproval, Beatrix accepted the proposal. Sadly, just a few weeks later, Norman died of leukemia. Beatrix was devastated, but vowed to move forward with her life the next year.

With the royalties Beatrix earned from her storybooks, she bought Hill Top Farm in Far Sawry. Far Sawry is in the lake district of England, a place she spent her summers as a child and loved very deeply. Although she now owned her own residence, unmarried Beatrix still lived with her parents in London. They were quite old by this time, but no less controlling. Hill Top Farm was the setting for many of Beatrix's later books including *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*.

As more money came in, Beatrix bought more property in the Lake District. In 1909 she bought Castle Farm from W. Heelis & Co. One of the partners of the firm was William Heelis, and he and Beatrix began courting. This did not please her parents however. Although she was now forty-seven and still single, William was not part of the Victorian bourgeoisie and her parents frowned on their relationship because they thought he was beneath their social position. Luckily, Beatrix's beloved brother Betram had gotten married and encouraged her to follow her heart, not please her parents. Beatrix did, and in 1913 Beatrix and William got married.

Beatrix and her husband lived a happy life together. Williams shared Beatrix's love of the Lake District and of farming. They moved to Cottage Castle in Sawrey and spent their years together farming. Beatrix took a special interest in Herdwick sheep, an endangered breed indigenous to the Lake District area. She encouraged the population of Herdwicks on all of her farms, and won major prizes at local shows for her sheep.



Throughout the rest of her life, Beatrix continued to purchase surrounding farmland to protect them from development. When she died in 1943, Beatrix's estate was more than 4000 acres of cottages, farmland and sheep. She left her entire estate to the National Trust. The National Trust was an organization created by Canon Rawnsley in 1895. As a child, and throughout the rest of her life, Rawnsley was a very prominent person in Beatrix's life. When she was young he used to encourage her artistic interests. Perhaps her gratitude and respect for him formed her fondness for the Lake District. Regardless, she loved the Lake District very, very much and devoted her life to protecting it from development. To this day, the land is still protected and the old villages remain largely untouched. In 1946, Hill Top Farm was opened to the public where thousands of people each year visited the farm that inspired Beatrix's stories.

Beatrix's style is a very distinct one. She did her sketching with pen and ink or pencil, and her paintings were primarily watercolor. Beatrix had a true love for art, and once wrote in her private journal:

"It is all the same, drawing, painting, modeling, the irresistible desire to copy any beautiful object which strikes the eye. Why cannot one be content to look at it? I cannot rest, I must draw, however poor the result."

Beatrix Potter was an amazing artist, farmer, scientist and naturalist. But most of all, she was an amazing woman. Trapped in a Victorian age where her work was rarely taken seriously, and women were laughed at for the desire to pursue interests and careers, Beatrix rose above it all. She did it her way, defeated the barriers that got in her way and followed her dream. In her own way, she changed the world—her legacy lives on today through her children's stories, her artwork and her estate. Beatrix Potter is an inspiring role model for all of us who dream to succeed, and she is an even more inspiring role model for women.