

## Beatrix Potter

A talk to The Eltham Society by Christopher Rudd  
Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2008

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The early years of many of us were enriched by our affection for Peter Rabbit, Squirrel Nutkin, Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, Jemima Puddle-Duck, among others, so it was no surprise that Christopher Rudd's talk to the Eltham Society about their creator, Beatrix Potter, attracted a full house.

Beatrix was born in South Kensington in 1866 and was an only child until the age of five. Her education was conducted entirely at home and such a cloistered childhood led her to become a rather shy child. But she developed a fondness for animals (often kept in her bedroom) and this, together with long holidays spent in the Lake District and Scotland, gave her a deep awareness and affection for the countryside, providing a very strong influence on her subsequent life. She became an accomplished writer and artist, later developing an interest for landscape consideration, inspired by her close friendship with Canon Hardwick Rawnsley, a founder of the National Trust.

Her literary career took off when she was in her thirties, sparked off when she herself financed the publication of her first 'little' book *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* in 1901, already establishing the writing style always associated with her – realism rather than sentimentality; true-to-life dialogue; dangers described authentically; and abstaining from moral judgement. Yet she once claimed that she was a child until the age of 50.

As a result of her private production of Peter Rabbit, Frederick Warne's Publications subsequently handled all her 'little' books and Beatrix became a firm friend of his son Norman. Their subsequent wish to become engaged was strongly opposed by her class-conscious parents because Norman was 'trade'. The problem was solved tragically by Norman's sudden death from pernicious anaemia.

Beatrix found some comfort from her books and from the purchase in 1905 of Hill Top Farm in the Lake District, financed from the royalties earned by her books (eight in number by then).

She then embarked on a campaign of acquiring farms to protect the livelihoods of hill-top farmers, helped by a firm of solicitors, WH Heels & Son, and Beatrix particularly relied on the advice of one of their staff, William Hellis. In October 1913, aged 46, again incurring her parents' displeasure, she married William in London. She carried on with her books until 1936, when the last volume *The Tale of Little Pig Robinson*, was published.

When she died on 22 December 1943 she owned over 4,000 acres of Lake District land, including fifteen farms and numerous cottages, together with large flocks of Herdwick sheep. And she had written twenty-five books. In her will she instructed that after her husband's death her entire estate should pass to the National Trust, a very precious legacy to the nation.



Christopher Rudd had created a warm, affectionate picture of a much loved artist, author, naturalist and conversationalist, beautifully illustrated with a series of memorable slides of a lovely corner of England – fitting tribute to a notable Englishwoman.

Marion Kennett,  
Les Murrell

**Bibliography** (in chronological order):

*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (twice); *The Tailor of Gloucester* (twice); *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*; *The tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle*; *The Pie and the Patty-Pan*; *The Tale of Mr Jeremy Fisher*; *The Story of a Fierce Bad Rabbit*; *The Story of Miss Moppet*; *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*; *The Roly-Poly Pudding* (alias *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*); *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*; *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles*; *The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse*; *The Tale of Timmy Tiptoes*; *The Tale of Mr Tod*; *The Tale of Pigling Bland*; *Appley Dapply's Nursery Rhymes*; *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse*; *Cecily Parsley's Nursery Rhymes*; *The Tale of Little Pig Robinson*.