

## Beatrix Potter and Tasha Tudor

An overview by Liz Barker

*Liz leads the monthly Book Talks program. Each month, she reads a variety of literature on a certain topic and the Book Talk group comes together for discussion. Due to Covid19, this spring and summer in-person sessions were cancelled. Liz provided an overview of her reading on Beatrix Potter and Tasha Tudor for us here, which would have been one of this summer's topics.*

Beatrix Potter and Tasha Tudor are both beloved for their illustrations of children's books. They share a 19th century time period which Beatrix lived and Tasha recreated for herself. The subjects and settings of their illustrations were drawn from life. The animals, no matter how anthromorphized, were true familiars. They shared a love and personal experience of the worlds they created . All those factors certainly influenced their popularity, exemplified in Peter Rabbit and Corgiville Fair.

Beatrix Potter: a Life in Nature / Linda Lear 2007 and Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller, and Countrywoman / Judy Taylor 1986 are both biographies. Linda Lear's book at 447 pages of text is double the size of Taylor's and includes extensive chapter notes and resources. Taylor's has an interesting chapter on the influence of the children's books. Both cover the whole life and include numerous photographs and drawings. There is an almost disconcerting repetition of specific quotations, possibly from letters. This diverges in the later years presenting a somewhat different view of their subject.

Beatrix Potter was a talented woman, very much a product of her times. Her parents were both from wealthy families. Her lawyer father devoted his time to social pursuits. They lived in London but spent the spring and much of the summer in rented country homes. Her brother Bertram was six years younger and became a painter. And she lived at home until she was 47.

Her father had always done drawings and was an avid photographer. He encouraged Beatrix in those areas. She and Bertram kept the nursery lively with numerous animals. Their observations and access to family friends and relatives developed a keen interest in natural history. Her schooling was entirely at home. The inclusion of two art teachers seemed more frustrating than helpful as Beatrix had her own ideas.

In her mid-twenties she did some scientific illustrations which included detailed drawings of fungi, an interest she shared with another "uneducated amateur". Her pursuit of questions about the life cycle of fungi and lichens led to the propagation of different spores. She came to the conclusions that many fungi had an underground life and that lichen were a fungi-algae combination. Consultations with mycologists at Kew Gardens and help from her uncle produced a paper on her experiments which was submitted to the Linnean Society. The scientific community at that time was very closed. Women were not allowed to attend Society meetings. Amateurs were dismissed as was her paper. Her experiments at home lacked scientific rigor but her conclusions (though not unique) about the underground mycelial life of fungi and the composition of lichens were accurate.

Beatrix wanted some sort of independence. First she sold several of her drawings for Christmas cards which had become popular in the mid-1890s. Over the years she had written "picture letters" to various young friends - short stories about animals accompanied by drawings. Attempts to market them were eventually accepted by Warne Publishers. She had previously arranged to have Peter Rabbit privately published in an attempt to demonstrate its marketability. Both books include comments about her warning Warne's that her father would be picky about any contract. Neither book quite explains what her legal status was as an unmarried

woman - with very controlling parents. She seems quite capable in her dealings with the publishers and had sufficient control over the royalties to purchase Hilltop Farm a few years later. Her father's firm handled the purchase but at a greatly inflated price.

Most of her negotiations with Warne's were with the youngest son, Norman. Close contacts and mutual interests led to his proposal which she accepted. Her parents did not approve. Her mother particularly thought publishing was a common trade and while both parents' money came from cotton based industry she was insistent that Beatrix marry for status and land. (One might wonder whether Beatrix's land purchases were influenced that stance. But I don't think that's quite the same thing.) Eventually they agree to an engagement. Three months later, Norman died from a virulent form of leukemia. The Warne family is much more sympathetic. Both the personal and professional contact are maintained for years. In 1917 Harold Warne is convicted of embezzling money from the publishing firm. Beatrix is a main creditor. She is not only tolerant but also puts together Appley-Daply's Nursery Rhymes for that year's Christmas firm. She does stipulate that Harold is never to have any connection with the firm and revises some copyright arrangements.

The purchase of Hilltop Farm was the beginning of Beatrix Potter's role of land conservationist. Unhappy with the overpayment arranged by her father's firm she begins dealing with the local Heelis firm. Three years later at age 47 she marries William Heelis. Not only do her parents object but the Heelis family, of long professional status in the local community, have objections to the Potter-Leech tradesmen new-rich family. But all ends more or less well. Her brother Bertram advocates for her while revealing his long concealed marriage to a lower class woman.

William shares Beatrix's interest in land conservation and actively assists in the acquisition of over 4000 acres in the Lake District. This eventually goes to the British Land Trust. She raised heritage Herdwick sheep and Galloway cattle. She repairs and rebuilds and manages the farms. She collects antique furniture and furnishings - artfully displayed and used in the farm residences. Her eyesight deteriorates making color illustrating difficult and she depends more on line drawings. Most of her energy goes into the farms.

After her father dies she persuades her mother to move nearer to her. The two biographies diverge in their recounting of later years. This applies especially to the mother-daughter relationship. The mother dies in 1932, age 93. Beatrix dies in 1943, age 76. The rheumatic fever she had when a young woman left her with some heart problems (and thin hair). In the 1930s she had surgery which left a poorly healed abdominal incision requiring elastic support. This was difficult to maintain during the war years. There were other problems in relation to rationing and the prospect of having to house military groups and/or evacuees. She appeared to lead an involved active life up to the end. The marriage seems to have been very happy with mutual interests and love. She remained very set in how she thought things should be done causing difficulties with the Land Trust. She was much respected for her involvement in the community both as a conservationist and a farmer. Later photographs of her almost resemble Mrs. Tiggy-winkle - a rather dumpy bent over old woman with a bonnet covering the bald spot on top of her head. Her children's books continue to appeal.

Two exceptionally complementary books to the biographies are Dorling Kindersley's *The Ultimate Peter Rabbit* and *At Home with Beatrix Potter* by Susan Denyer. The DK book details each of Potter's books from her original picture letters to children and photographs of settings and animals through various stages of development. A concluding section focuses on derivatives. Walt Disney wasn't the first to capitalize on the potential for dolls and board games and clothing, even wallpaper. Much of this was initiated by Beatrix Potter who was a meticulous critic of products and protective of her copyright. *At Home* is a lavishly photographed

view of Hilltop House. It shows her realistic approach to background and represents her interest in the conservation of period architecture and associated furnishings.

### ***Tasha Tudor 1915-2008***

I had two books available: *The Private World of Tasha Tudor* with Richard Brown (1992) and *Drawn from New England: Tasha Tudor a Portrait in Words and Pictures* by Bethany Tudor (1979). Both, lavishly illustrated with photographs and her drawings, focus on the mid nineteenth century life she recreated, lived, and portrayed in the illustrations for over 100 books. Her family was connected with Boston society which colored the first 9 years of her life until her parents divorced. Her artist mother spent much of her time in New York City leaving Tasha with what she described as Bohemian neighbors who changed her life. Her goals, obviously successfully achieved, were to live on a secluded farm and illustrate children's books.

Her first book, *Pumpkin Moonshine*, funded the original farm in Connecticut. She married and, four children and 23 years later, they divorced. The book by her daughter Bethany mentions the father only twice in the idyllic descriptions of growing up on the farm. Tasha in the other book implies that he became disillusioned with the primitive life. They had no plumbing, and no electricity until the youngest child was 5. The later home in Vermont appears to be primarily dependent upon gas and candle light. I'm sure that years ago I read that she had a freezer to preserve animals for models. She preferred a wood fired cook stove and enjoyed preparing food.

The amount of physical work and the attention to detail in her gardens, her clothing - and dolls and - parties - and marionettes is astonishing. She drew up the plans for the smaller Vermont house and her son Seth built it using hand tools. He did bulldoze the ground and she rototilled the original garden. She spun and wove and grew a whole field of flax which she soaked and retted herself.

Wikipedia provided some basic facts, and some disconcerting ones. It did not clarify all perplexing details. She died at age 96 leaving an estate of \$2 million which mostly went to her son Seth, the one "unestranged" child. The two girls (both author/illustrators) got \$1000 each and the other son some token artifact. I can almost sympathize. It is difficult to sort out how old the children were when the couple divorced. How remunerative was her work at that time and how did they manage financially? The marionette performances seem to have provided some necessary income. At some point they spent a year in England. There the youngest son acquired the first corgi which was a tremendous influence in her life.

I should forget about the fuzzy details and the overwhelming, intimidating accomplishments. That just interferes with the enjoyment of and appreciation for the beautiful world she created. Relish Bethany Tudor's portrait of beautiful gardens, wonderful food and constant parties with Tasha working on her illustrations at the kitchen table and the corgis enlivening the scene.

Tasha Tudor is perhaps more accessible to a contemporary American audience than Beatrix Potter. Neither were ideal models for life. Both are exemplary examples of women's talents and fortitude. The continuing influence of their books and illustrations should encourage a deep appreciation for children's books and the rural life. Enjoy.