

## **SERMON: "FUNGI, RABBITS AND SHEEP"**

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She was born on 28 July 1866, at 2 Bolton Gardens, South Kensington, London. Both her parents were descended from wealthy families who had made their fortunes in the Lancashire cotton industry.

Her brother, born five years later, was sent off to boarding school, so her childhood was essentially solitary, dull and leisured. She never went to school, but spent most of her time in the nursery of the large, dark, stuffy house - once described by a cousin as "a dark Victorian mausoleum, complete with aspidistras".

She had been born into a period and a class which seem to have had little understanding of childhood. Removed by at least a generation from direct contamination by trade, and not active in any profession, her parents had fallen under the stultifying, sterile spell of moneyed gentility.

Her father had been called to the Bar and described himself as a barrister; but he had never practised. The only brief he had ever received turned out to be a hoax - a discovery which he made with great relief! He spent much time at his clubs, where he read the newspapers, discussed politics, and generally lived the life of a gentleman.

He was interested in art, and became a very competent photographer, using the unwieldy cameras of the day with great effect for both landscapes and portraits; and even managing to include himself in family photographs, presumably with a timed release on the shutter.

Her mother led the life of a typical London lady of her class, driving in her carriage to visit friends for tea, to shop, or merely to leave her card, and attending or giving sumptuous dinner parties.

It was a cloistered life of solemn, rigid ritual, both daily and annually. Easter meant a family exodus, generally to the seaside, for several weeks. In summer the family, complete with servants, rented a furnished house in Scotland for up to three months: long stretches of idleness for everyone except the servants.

Both her parents were Unitarians, whose forebears had included some remarkable people:- her father's father, for example, had been Liberal MP for Carlisle, a friend of famous and influential people, a reformer as well as an industrialist, one of those clear-sighted, humane and science-loving Victorians who made it easy for the age to believe in its own progress. In their religious faith, as in their lives, her parents were calm, avoiding the vulgar enthusiasm which had made their forebears interesting.

They were less rigidly concerned about church-going than many Church of England families. They possessed a fair degree of the tolerance, if not the intellectualism, of their sect. They went to various Unitarian churches, with various ministers, and their children were allowed to grow up in the belief that one might, without spiritual injury, enjoy a simple religious service of any denomination, provided it were plain. The religious atmosphere of the household was not oppressive.

But the young girl's starched and pinafores existence, although enlivened by the arrival of her younger brother, was repressed and airless.

She seems not to have been particularly unhappy. Quiet, solitary, observant children often create their own world and live in it, nourishing their imaginations on the material at hand.

From an early age she had - what she called in later life - "an irresistible desire to copy any beautiful object which strikes the eye", and she was never happier than when drawing or painting anything she could lay her hands on. As she and her brother grew up, they had an astonishing variety of pets: not merely the traditional ones, but unusual ones including a grass-snake, lizards, newts, a hedgehog, a bat, and various birds. These pets, and other creatures she found in the garden, became subjects for her pencil and paint-brush.

One sketch book contains a very good painting of about a dozen caterpillars, done when she was only eight years old. On the facing page are details of the insects, their food-plants, and times of emergence.

She and her brother decided to make a collection of all the plants, animals and insects they could find, and smuggled home innumerable beetles, toadstools, dead birds, hedgehogs, frogs, caterpillars, minnows, snake-skins. If the dead specimen were not past skinning, they skinned it; if it were, they boiled it and kept the bones. On one occasion, having obtained a dead fox, they skinned and boiled it successfully in secret, and articulated the skeleton.

And everything that they brought home, they drew or painted. Her sketch-books were filled with sheep, rabbits, cows, caterpillars, cottages, a leaf or two, a sprig of wall-flower, a view of a dairy. Realistic enough for the most part, and as careful of detail as a ten year-old can be; but here and there fantasy breaks through:- mufflers appear round the necks of newts; rabbits walk upright, skate on ice, carry umbrellas, walk out in bonnets and mantles.

When her brother was eleven he went away to boarding school, and she was alone again. From the age of twelve, she had had art lessons from a visiting teacher. Now, at the age of 17, she attended a course of twelve lessons in oil painting. She thought that she would be able to live her own life and give her whole time to what had become a passion: painting.

Her mother thought differently, and appointed a new governess for her, mainly to teach German and French. This new governess was only a year or two older, and the two became good friends. It was a great disappointment when, less than two years later, the governess left the family's service to marry a civil engineer.

She wrote:

I have liked my last governess best on the whole - (she) had her faults, and was one of the youngest people I have ever seen, but she was very good-tempered and intelligent.

They continued to keep in touch. She regularly drove out in the family to coach to visit.

The former governess and her husband eventually had eight children, of whom she became very fond. She brought little presents for them, and sometimes took some of her pets for them to play with. When they were ill she visited them or, if she was away, wrote exciting picture letters to them in story form. This close contact with young children was later to be of greater value than she could ever have predicted.

Her brother's tastes in painting were for the large and vague - moorlands, sunsets, misty glens - but hers were for the precise and the minute, for the fine details of a plant, for mosses under a microscope, for the fabric of a mouse's nest, for the eye of a squirrel. She drew

like a naturalist - no leaf too modest, no twig too small for her attention.

She spent long hours with her eye to her brother's microscope, drawing the spores of mould with their thread-like growth; or in museums leaning over the fossil cases with sketch-book and pencil.

Her journal at that stage is full of boulders and scree and speculations about strata. The taste for scientific matters, shared with her brother in their early years, developed into a serious pursuit.

Even more absorbing than coloured microscopic forests or the spirals of vanished shells revealed in stone were the bewildering funguses to be found every autumn, either in Scotland or in the Lake District. Some were slender and fairy-like; some scattered like birds' eggs; some like studs of ruby; some like golden coral; some like barnacles. No two were alike. She wrote:

I have been drawing funguses very hard; I think some day they will be put in a book, but it will be a dull one to read. We have had one little fungus like red holly berries - it had only been found once before in Scotland.

Elsewhere:

Was overtaken with funguses, especially *Hygrophorus*. Found a lovely pink one. They begin to come in crowds, exasperating to leave.

And later:

I found upwards of twenty sorts in a few minutes ... and joy of joys, a sticky *Gomphidus glutinosus*, a round, slimy, purple head among the moss, which I took up carefully with my old cheese-knife, and turning over saw the slimy veil. There is extreme complacency in finding a totally new species for the first time.

Back in London it really seemed that the months she had spent on her funguses might at last bear fruit. The idea of illustrating a book on the subject seriously took hold of her. Over the years she had made hundreds of beautifully exact drawings - identifying and classifying specimens, dissecting, comparing varieties and checking details at the Natural History Museum.

Help came in 1896 - her 30th year - in the person of her uncle, a chemist of some distinction who had been knighted for his services to science. He took her to Kew; this became the first of a series of meetings with the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens and other august botanists.

Unfortunately they were skeptical, and tended to pass her on to others, and to talk with her uncle rather than with her.

The trouble was, as soon unmistakably appeared, that an amateur was not quite welcome in those precincts. Not only were the water-colours - as the Director pointed out with evident pleasure - lacking the diagrammatic extension of detail necessary for scientific usefulness, but this unknown young woman had developed theories. She even went so far as to have her own ideas about the propagation of the spores of moulds, and to offer a theory that lichens were actually dual organisms, funguses living in close association with algae.

(In this, as it later turned out, she was perfectly right, though forestalled in her small discovery by a learned German.)

The Director subsequently wrote a letter to her uncle which he - the uncle - described as "stupid" and "rude", written by a man who was "a little rough-spoken and knew nothing about the subject."

The upshot of this "storm in a tea-kettle", as she considered it, was that her uncle egged her on to write a paper on the burning subject of the spores of moulds.

He went over it minutely for corrections. Finally, at his suggestion, it was read before the Linnaean Society of London. It was not, however, read by its author; ladies were not allowed to attend meetings. This was something, certainly, but it was not much. The excitement of several years had ended in disappointment. Although for a time she continued in her passion for funguses, she knew now that it would lead nowhere. One by one, reluctantly, she laid aside the treasured folios of water-colours.

Her considerable contribution to mycology, the study of fungi, and the remarkably accurate botanical drawings and paintings she had produced, were vindicated some 70 years later - more than 20 years after her death - when Dr W P K Findlay, a professional mycologist and Past President of the British Mycological Society, selected 59 of them for a book on the fungus flora of Britain. More than half the pictures in the book were hers - the other 48 were provided by another professional mycologist and author, and a commercial natural history artist. The book was published in 1967 - and it was not a dull book to read.

She had already sold drawings to firms producing greeting cards. She had even tried to interest a number of publishers of children's books in a booklet illustrated by her own sketches, but it had always been returned. She decided to try again.

One of the quiet amusements of her lonely existence had been the writing of letters to other people's children:- letters which she illustrated with pen and ink, and sometimes in water-colours. Among those to whom she wrote, sometimes about her pets, were the children of her friend and former governess.

The letters had been carefully preserved, and she was able to borrow one of them to use as the basis for her story, writing it out in a lined exercise book with the text on one page and pen-and-ink drawings on the other.

The manuscript was sent to six publishers, but they all rejected it. She decided to pay for it to be published herself, and arranged for a printer to produce 250 copies. They were ready by Christmas 1901, and she sent some to friends and relations as Christmas presents.

Other copies were sold - some to obliging aunts - and soon the stock was exhausted and another 200 were ordered. One of the firms which had rejected the manuscript now became interested, if the illustrations were done in colour. There was a flurry of correspondence and activity, and a contract was signed in June 1902. The book was published in October, with a print-run of 8,000 copies. By the end of the first year of publication there had been six printings, and a total of more than 56,000 copies.

In that same year she published another little book privately. The same firm produced a commercial edition the following year, as well as a third story. From then until 1915, the firm published a new story by her every year.

The firm was Frederick Warne & Co Ltd. The first story was The Tale of Peter Rabbit. And she was Beatrix Potter. From a life of seclusion and obscurity, in her mid-thirties, she was soon to become famous.

Most people are familiar enough with Beatrix Potter as the writer and illustrator of the wonderful series of children's stories. There simply

is not time to cover all the details of her life, so I propose to pass over the middle part of her life - the "Rabbits" of my title: "Fungi, Rabbits and Sheep".

That means omitting her developing relationship with Norman Warne, youngest son of the founder of the firm; his proposal of marriage when she was 39; her parents' objections - because he was from a "trade", and because they wanted Beatrix, as the dutiful daughter she had always been, to stay with them to help run the household and look after them; and the unhappy resolution of the difficulty when he died from pernicious anaemia.

It means skipping ahead to her purchase of Hill Top Farm, Sawrey, in the Lake District which she had come to love. It means glossing over her gradual acquisition of other land and property in that area, and her determination to try to preserve the small farms, and farm-workers' cottages, so that the way of life of the country people could continue to preserve the landscape as she knew it.

It means omitting more than a passing reference to her long friendship with Canon Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley, whom she had first met when he was Vicar of Wray; or to her family's friendship with Rev William Gaskell, Unitarian Minister of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, and husband of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell; or to her work in setting up - and paying for - a district nursing service in the Hawkshead area, which ran very successfully for many years until eventually taken over when the National Health Service came into existence; or to the discovery after her death of her secret journal, in which she endlessly recorded - in her own secret code - the thoughts and impressions of her youth, even until she was past 30.

It means passing quickly to the developing relationship with William Heelis, the partner in the local law firm who dealt with her various purchases and investments, who admired the strong-willed woman from London, and who in late 1912 asked her to marry him.

Again, the attitude of her parents was predictable: a simple country solicitor was not a suitable match for her. Any decision had to be delayed, because that winter she had a serious attack of influenza which kept her bed-ridden for a long time.

But that delay provided an opportunity for help from her brother Bertram, who had for some years been farming at Ancrim, in Scotland. He wrote to tell their parents that, seven years previously, he had married a local girl, Mary Scott, from Hawick; that he was very happy; and that Beatrix, now 47, ought to be allowed to marry William. Her parents reluctantly consented, and the wedding took place in October 1913.

They settled in Sawrey, and after the completion of alterations moved into Castle Cottage, where they spent the rest of their lives, keeping Hill Top as a place for Beatrix to write, and store all her papers.

Beatrix Potter produced only six more books after her marriage. She preferred to channel her energies into farming. Whenever the opportunity arose, she added to her land, saving estates from being broken up and farmland from building development.

In 1923-24 she greatly increased her standing in the farming community by buying the magnificent Troutbeck Park Farm, together with 2,000 acres of fell grazing, and a flock of hundreds of local Herdwick sheep, a particularly hardy breed known for its coarse, very strong wool, and also for its mutton.

Her interest in this breed of sheep owed much to her old friend Hardwicke Rawnsley, who for more than 30 years had campaigned to preserve it. In 1899 he and his son Noel founded the Herdwick Sheepbreeders' Association, of which Beatrix Potter became President in 1930, the first woman elected to that position.

She engaged a young man, Tom Storey, as her shepherd and adviser, and then as her manager at Hill Top Farm. He soon demonstrated his skill by eradicating the pest of liver fluke with which the stock had been heavily infested.

They made a happy and successful partnership, and soon were winning awards for prize Herdwicks at all the agricultural shows. She became an acknowledged expert, and a well-known judge of the breed. Her husband William - or Willie - helped with her various property purchases, and took great interest in the farming, but he left most of it to Beatrix while he continued with his legal practice. A kind, courteous gentleman, he was a popular and respected member of the community.

For the remainder of her life, Beatrix Potter was really two people.

First, and best known, she was Beatrix Potter: author and illustrator, creator of Peter Rabbit, of Jemima Puddle-duck, Tom Kitten, Mrs Tittlemouse, and all the others; and she was a generous correspondent to the admirers of her books from many parts of the world.

Second, she was Mrs Heelis: farmer, sheepbreeder, respected show judge in the part of the country where she had settled and which she had made her own, a sometimes eccentric woman who wore clogs and a sacking apron and was even known to have covered her head with a rhubarb leaf in a hot hay-field.

And always, quietly, she had given generous support to the National Trust, founded in 1895 by the philanthropist Miss Octavia Hill, the lawyer Sir Robert Hunter, and her old friend Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley.

When she died on 22 December 1943, aged 77, Beatrix Potter owned over 4,000 acres of the Lake District, including 15 farms, numerous cottages, and large flocks of Herdwick sheep. In her will she instructed that, after her husband's death, all this should pass to the National Trust, except for a few small legacies to friends and relatives. William Heelis did not wish to retain the property, and relinquished his interest before he died. He did not long outlive his beloved wife, but died on 4 August 1945, leaving his own property also to the National Trust.

Although in her adult life there seems to have been little overt expression of the Unitarianism of her forebears, we can claim her as one of our own. We can acknowledge her gift of fantasy and pleasure to countless children of generations past, present and future. We can marvel at the way she achieved so much despite the repressed and limited circumstances of her childhood.

We can pay tribute to her self-taught skill as a mycologist, and the scientific perception which remained unrecognised by eminent men. That same scientific perception enabled her to develop her skill as a farmer, sheepbreeder, sheep judge.

And we can acknowledge the enormous debt of gratitude owed to her by the National Trust and all those who have benefitted from her dedicated support during her life and generous legacy at her death.

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With grateful acknowledgement to Elsie Davis of Upper Chapel, Sheffield 6