

IN THIS ISSUE . . . *Northeast Foray Report, p. 3; Praise for Lynn Payer's New Book; p. 5; Plans for the Annual Banquet, Insert*

NEWSLETTER



Vol. 13, No. 3

September-October 1988

BEATRIX POTTER THE MYCOLOGIST, 1856-1943

by Emil Lang

Beatrix Potter, artist and story teller is a household name on every continent, and Beatrix Potter characters -- Peter Rabbit, Mr. Jeremy Fisher, Jemima Fuddleduck, Squirrel Nutkin and a clutch of others are treated as beloved friends by children of all ages from 5-85.

The Potter name has made sweet music at the box office for 85 years, and without even a pause for rest or recreation. Her books have sold 65 million copies in English language editions and millions more in 18 foreign language translations, ranging from French, Spanish, Italian and German, all the way to Welsh, Icelandic, Latin, Africans and Japanese. Her life story emerges as an amazing saga even in an amazing century of amazing sagas.

Yet for all of that, Beatrix Potter the mycologist is a renowned unknown even in the world of mycology or ranks at best as a casual acquaintance among a few battalions of the inquisitive.

These reflections were invigorated by the glorious Beatrix Potter Exhibition at the Pierpont Morgan Library which enjoyed a tumultuous success and closed a sellout 14-week run on August 21, 1988. Over 130,000 visitors crowded in for a closeup peek, and many popped back for a second, a third and even a fourth helping. (The writer was a three-time offender).

How did you happen to get into mushroom rooms is a question newcomers frequently address to more seasoned amateurs. A few sentences of explanation usually suffice to

appease the curious. But in Beatrix Potter's case, complications loom up, wheels within wheels rear their heads and the realistic answer lies intertwined with her whole life style, as she progressed from childhood to girlhood to womanhood.

Beatrix Potter, the idol of children the world over, enjoyed little or no childhood of her own, certainly in the sense the term is understood nowadays. She was a lonely, solitary child and a childhood victim of emotional neglect by her parents, Rupert and Helen Potter. The family was in easy circumstances, both parents had inherited moderate wealth, and both were swallowed up from first to last by the elegant social rounds in the well-to-do circles of Victorian London.

The father, a barrister by profession, never bothered to practice and he whiled away his entire professional life in a state of permanent retirement. The mother was a social activist who tossed elegant and elaborate dinner parties for her husband's friends. Every afternoon, she drove out punctually in her carriage to drop off her calling cards at the homes of selected social equals.

In childhood and girlhood, Beatrix was paroled in the custody of nursemaids and governesses, and was assigned modest nursery rooms on the third floor of the Potter's London townhouse. She never saw the inside of a schoolroom and her schooling was delegated in toto into the hands of governesses. Friends and playfellows of her own age never came her way. By her later teens, her formal schooling came to a standstill, and thereafter she became her own favorite teacher, and her favorite teacher's favorite student. Teacher and student got along on the best and easiest of terms.

Her nursery rooms did triple duty and more as her living quarters, her classroom

and her dining hall. Her meals were ferried up to her on a tray from the kitchen below. In the course of her childhood she left those rooms during the London season only to take daily strolls in the park in the company of her nursemaid, or to be taken downstairs to bid her parents good night. On red letter days alone did those visits stretch beyond a few moments.

By her eleventh birthday, the one and only child companion of her life signed in. It was her brother Bertram who was her junior by six years. They became fast friends and comrades as he swiftly soaked up a segment of her active interests and made them his own.

Beatrix Potter was a lifelong witness to the truth of the old adage that what fire does not destroy it toughens. Many children in her shoes would have had lasting emotional stigmata to show. She did not escape unscathed, but she did develop into a remarkable human being and enjoyed a happy marriage 30 years long that was cut short only by death.

Left to her own devices in childhood, and with time aplenty on her hands, she made up strings of tales to keep herself amused. She taught herself to draw and to paint and in her life, drawing became an escape hatch opening into a world of her own creation. "I cannot rest, I must draw," she wrote. By the time she was eight, her first governess, Miss Hammond, discovered her precocious talent and nurtured and encouraged it. As time passed, her father and other knowledgeable grown-ups joined an ever-swelling chorus of encouragement givers of her drawing skills.

At eight, she began keeping sketch books in which she drew the flowers, birds, animals and scenery she spotted all about her. Her only instruction in painting came when she reached twelve and studied for a spell with two art teachers from whom she picked up the finer points of watercolor technique and perspective.

Summer after summer, from her fifth year onward, the Potter family rented a country house for a three month holiday. In the first 10 years, the Scottish Highlands were the summer mecca, but in the seasons that followed, the Highlands passed the sceptre to the English Lake District, the country which inspired Wordsworth and Coleridge, Turner and Constable, and a constellation of other writers and artists. On these holidays, the parents surrounded

themselves with close family friends as house guests, among them the renowned painter Sir John Edward Millais, the noted orator and statesman John Bright and the well-known Unitarian minister, Wm. Gaskell.

For the guests, salmon fishing and deer stalking formed the highlight activities of the day. For Beatrix with Bertram tagging along afterwards, cruising the fields and the forest floor became the enthralling focus of attention. A deep love of nature settled upon her mind and senses and she expressed it in albums of accurate and enchanting drawings of the creatures and plants encountered on her strolls. The choicest of the lot, the pick of the litter, were her watercolors of fungi, a topic that held her in thrall for years and years.

In the span of 15 years, she created a gallery of 300 and more mushroom portraits, in exquisite watercolors mostly, and drawn in remarkable detail. They pioneered in focusing attention on what in modern parlance are labeled "field marks." Mushrooms were portrayed in their natural habitats along with their companion grasses, ferns, leaves, et al. Amanita muscaria, to choose but one example out of many, was flanked by polypody ferns, mosses and the dog lichen, Peltigera canina, all meticulously painted in lovely watercolor.

Beatrix devoted endless hours of study under the microscope to mushrooms of many descriptions, and in the later paintings, spores and other microscopic characteristics were introduced and outlined in their precise shapes and colors. She confided to her secret diary that her dream was the paintings would one day be published in a book. But alas, not a single expert volunteered the least interest in writing the text.

In 1966, long after her death, Dr. W.P.K. Findley, a Past President of the British Mycological Society and a noted Polypore expert, attended a Centenary Exposition of her paintings to commemorate her birth year. He saw the light then and

To receive information on membership in the New York Mycological Society write to Janet Suits, Secretary, 41 Great Jones Street, New York, N.Y. 10012 or Ralph Cox, Treasurer, 567 West End Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10024. To comment on anything in the Newsletter, write to Gene Better, Editor, 212 East 113rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10003 (Tel: 212-475-1409). Letters or articles are welcome from non-members as well as members of the Society. Your text can be received via PC modem or CompuServe mailbox no. 76656,2316.

there and became a born-again Potter convert on the spot. He prepared a charming well-written mushroom handbook, *Woodland and Wayside Fungi*, and reproduced 59 Beatrix Potter paintings in color by way of illustration, supplemented with 29 paintings by other hands. The volume came off the press in 1967, and was issued by Frederick Warne & Co., the one and only English publisher the Beatrix Potter volumes had ever known. It rates a selected niche all its own on the shelf of every inquiring amateur.

Beatrix Potter faced the fact that many fungi can outlive the winter months through the propagation of spores. She succeeded in sprouting the spores of over 40 species, although knowledge of the precise method she employed has been lost. In one instance, at least, she recorded her data at six-hour intervals and at a magnification of 500 times, made under the microscope. In Great Britain, she was the first to score with the spores of Basidiomycetes, and with gilled mushrooms most notably.

Assured of her ground, she felt emboldened to go and consult the experts on the point at Kew, Britain's foremost Botanical Garden. She was presented to the Director, Sir Wm. Thistleton Dyer, and the Assistant Director, George Masee, who also served at the time as the first President of the British Mycological Society. Thistleton-Dyer was a daunting martinet of the Captain Bligh stripe, and he clamped down hard on dissent from underlings in the lower deck, to say nothing of a vulgar upstart of an amateur who had the cheeky impertinence to boast of being a woman. And worse yet, she had the effrontery to conduct independent experiments and to champion independent theories without even deferring to those of her professional betters.

But on the strength of her researches, Beatrix prepared a paper "On the Germination of the Spores of the Agaricineae" and submitted it to the Royal Linnaean Society of London, the foremost natural history society of the country. It was near the close of Queen Victoria's long reign, yet the Linnaean Society stood out as a bastion of anti-feminism. Woman as members were unacceptable, and their very presence even as guests was equally unacceptable.

On April 1, 1897, in the interests of science, the Society permitted the paper to be read. But in the interests of anti-feminism, the paper was given to George Masee to read while the author was dis-

barred from even entering the hall to hear her own paper as it came from the podium. Following the reading, Beatrix requested that the paper be withdrawn and the Linnaean Society complied. Since then, the paper has found its way into the bottomless coils of the Lost and Never Found Department.

The Potter plans for the years ahead now shifted course, and the telling of little animal tales for children became the central focus. "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" reached publication privately in 1901 and in the following year Frederick Warne and Co. took it into professional custody. Overnight, it turned into a runaway best seller and from that moment Beatrix Potter never looked back. Literature gained an illustrator and writer of children's tales of world stature, while biology and mycology lost a memorable, inquisitive, blue ribbon talent, in the making.

In her long career as an artist and story teller, Beatrix Potter was overwhelmed on all sides with compliments galore. But the one she treasured most all the days of her life stemmed from Sir John Millais:

"Plenty of people can draw," he remarked, "but you and my son John have observation."

In the creative arts, and in the sciences too, to have observation is one prime ingredient which helps to divide the boys and the girls from the grown-ups.

* * *

NORTHEAST FORAY TRIES COMEDY HOUR

AFTER FATTENING UP WITH CLAMBAKE

The 1988 Northeastern Mycological Foray was held at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, Aug. 4-7. It drew about 265 registrants; it went on despite daytime high temperatures in the upper 90s; it featured a giant clam bake; and, it resulted in 321 species of fungi being collected and logged.

But that was not all, for this year's "Northeast", the 13th successive staging of the largest annual gathering of mushroom hunters in the states from Maryland to Maine, also offered an evening of mushroom satire, a program of skits put on by members of the foray's sponsoring clubs

