



'Over the Hills and Far Away'; the life of Beatrix Potter

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There are two outstanding waymarks on Beatrix Potter's posthumous journey to an international celebrity (which she would have hated). The first was a biography, **The Tale of Beatrix Potter**, by Margaret Lane (1947), which set out for the first time the extraordinary adventure of her life; the second was the publication of Leslie Linder's transcription over almost 450 pages, of the journal which she composed in code during the years of her adolescence and later from 1881 to 1897. This was happily timed for issue in 1966, the centenary of Potter's birth, which was also celebrated with a major exhibition at the National Book League where, again for the first time, the range of her artistic achievements was made manifest. The catalogue appeared to give slight credit to Mr Linder, but he ? a man of extreme modesty ? not only introduced it and compiled the superb descriptions of its 365 entries, but lent a considerable quantity of its fascinating exhibits.

With last year's fevered activity marking the sesquicentenary of Potter's birth it is of interest that new biographies of both Potter and Linder have replicated those earlier gestures which brought her to such wide notice. (I visited the NBL exhibition and can vouch for the fact that queues to get in stretched down Albemarle Street almost to Piccadilly.) Matthew Dennison takes a plain path 'over the hills' which amounts to a precis of the work of his forerunners. He is clearly devoted to what are called for short 'the little books', although they were originally published in diverse formats before being homogenized as a boxable regiment, and he often notes instances in Potter's life which can be paralleled (such as the class separation of mistress and servant in **Two Bad Mice**). These may be apt, but they presume a reader already familiar with the books or willing to burrow into the box. (And such a one would not get far with **The Sly Old Cat** ? a wonderful book ? or the **Faithful Dove** which are *hors série*)

A systematic account of the writing and illustration of the books is not part of Dennison's brief though since he is seeking the life behind them. Thanks to the transcribed journal, the first half of his account can dwell on the slow emergence into daylight of Potter's determined personality, an incubation which he describes through no fewer than 157 journal quotations in 150 pages. These support his obvious, but not very nuanced, treatment of the home-life of the Potter family, but once Beatrix breaks free into the double life lived initially between Kensington and her farm in Near Sawrey (in Westmorland, not Lancashire, Mr Dennison) he ceases to be dependent on so uniform a source. The scope

for references widens vastly and the seventy pages that Dennison devotes to Potter's last thirty-odd years, while very readable, cannot help but gloss over what was really the most testing time of her life, but one lacking the dramatic appeal of her earlier years.

The knowledgeable reader, already perhaps familiar with both the books and the life, can fill in the omissions that would have coloured Dennison's synopsis, but I think that newcomers to 'the life' would have greatly benefited from an expansion of his flimsy book-list. An authorial historiography of the descriptive and interpretive studies that have preceded **Over the Hills** could itself have provided a fruitful guide to the exploratory work of Dennison's predecessors. Regrettably though, Penguin Books, who own the Warne imprint, prefer the profitable and misguided exploitation of things like **Kitty-in-Boots** to preserving in print many enjoyable and richly informative offerings of bibliographical importance.

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High on the list of such offerings are the contributions to Potter studies of Leslie Linder (1904-1973), the 'secret code breaker' who is the subject of Alan Wiltshire's biography and whose **History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter** is, with the journal, an essential adjunct to biographical explorations. Unlike everyone else in the story, Linder had no experience of children, children's book publishing, graphic art, or farming and Wiltshire gives a detailed introduction to the family's involvement in shipping matters. Linder followed his father in directing the Coubro & Sutton manufacturing company, and had experienced literature primarily as the author of **Safe Working Loads of Lifting Tackle**, first published in 1945.

His earliest encounter as an adult with Beatrix Potter was through his management of the library of the Congregational Church at Buckhurst Hill where he worshipped, and recollection of how he enjoyed her books as a child led him to his single-minded investigation of their making, buttressed by his capacity for methodical study and an income which enabled him to build the finest collection of her work in existence. Features of this direction of his energies have been described before in various sources, but Wiltshire is the first to encapsulate Linder's career in a separate volume.

In his youth, Wiltshire was a member of the same church as Linder and, as a resident of Buckhurst Hill, was familiar with local scenes and activities. (Among his many, rather dimly printed, illustrations there is a startling picture of Linder in mid-air, diving from the top board over his swimming-pool.) He is also though, a man ? like Linder -- foreign to the experiences behind Potter's career about which he has had to learn as he composed his book. Its central purpose, which derives from Linder's brief explanatory preface to the journal transcription, details the meticulous labour entailed in the deciphering of the code and, as the text emerged, the biographical significance of its contents. That involves quite a lot of repetition of hitherto recorded activity but it weds it to descriptions of Linder's methods, revealing, for instance, his gifts as a photographer as well as his scrupulous activity as a collector.

Since the book is, in effect, privately published, its structure, including many personal interpolations by the author, has a rather charming naivety about it which enhances the personality of its approach (although his constant iteration of definitions in section titles ['Home: the Place where one Lives'] soon gets irritating). There is sore need of some professional editorial control, not least in the painfully jumbled 75 pages of Appendices, but it does bring home the tremendous energy and skill which characterised the work of Linder and the support he received from his sister with whom he shared his mansion (they were both pianists and had four pianos, two upstairs and two down!). For me, a near contemporary of Mr Wiltshire, living not far from Buckhurst Hill, it also awoke nostalgia for a world as vanished as the now demolished Congregational church where everything began.

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