



# News from The Land Between the Lakes

A newsletter for friends and fans of  
Susan Wittig Albert's *Cottage Tales of Beatrix Potter*

Issue Number 3

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*"Because you are fond of  
fairy-tales . . . I have made  
you a story all for yourself,  
a new one that nobody has  
read before."*

Beatrix Potter, 1901

## The Cottage Tales of Beatrix Potter

By Susan Wittig Albert  
[www.cottagetales.com](http://www.cottagetales.com)

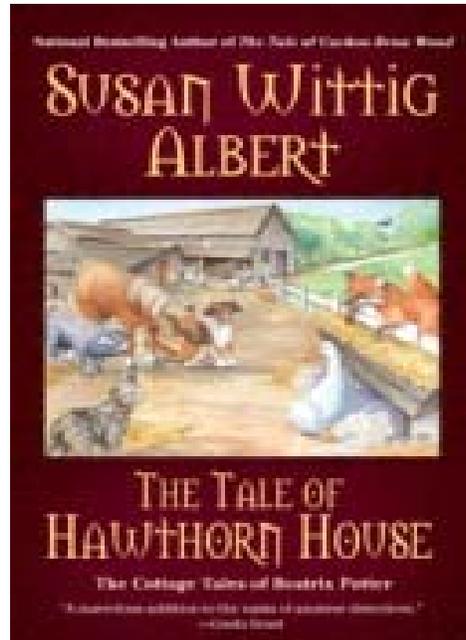
Book One  
The Tale of Hill Top Farm

Book Two  
The Tale of Holly How

Book Three  
The Tale of  
Cuckoo Brow Wood

Book Four  
The Tale of Hawthorn House

## The Cottage Tales: Book Four



## More Praise for *The Cottage Tales*

"Fabulous."  
—*Midwest Book Review*

"Perfectly charming."  
—*Booklist*

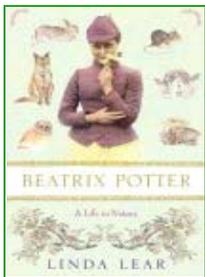
"Enchantment."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Beatrix positively shines."  
—*School Library Journal*

"As charming as the 'little books' themselves,  
this is sure to delight Beatrix Potter fans  
and cozy lovers everywhere."  
—*Publishers Weekly, Starred Review*

"I loved it!"  
—Linda Lear, *Beatrix Potter:*





## Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature

Dr. Linda Lear's new biography of Beatrix Potter appeared recently, a must-read for every fan of Beatrix Potter's work. In a starred review, *Booklist* calls it "a meticulously researched and brilliantly re-created life . . . endlessly fascinating and often illuminating. It is altogether a remarkable achievement." Here is a recent interview with Linda Lear.

### **Biographers have so much material to choose from. What made you decide to focus on Beatrix Potter?**

Eight years ago I was visiting London when I stumbled on an exhibit of Beatrix Potter's fungi watercolors. I knew nothing about her skill as a botanical artist, her importance as a natural scientist, or her life as a countrywoman in the Lake District. It seemed very few others knew about this other life either, so I decided to tell her amazing story.

### **Most people know Beatrix Potter as simply a children's author and illustrator. What else would you like them to know about her?**

There are so many extraordinary facets to her life, and so much that's been neglected in the focus on her children's writing and art that it's impossible to give a short answer. Beatrix Potter came from a merchant family with artistic skills and reformist inclinations. She was the first children's storyteller to see the possibility of merchandising her literary characters, and she shrewdly patented a Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddle-duck doll, drew wallpaper friezes, designed tea-sets and handkerchiefs, even created a Peter Rabbit board game with rules, long before her publishers caught on to what a business opportunity she had laid out.

She was a talented naturalist, but born into a world that discounted the contributions of amateur scientists, especially women. She discovered how fungi reproduce, did microscopic drawings of the process, and was the first person in Great Britain to theorize the process of symbiosis between algae and fungi into a new organism. She even understood and observed the anti-bacterial properties of penicillin.

Most importantly, at a time when nature was viewed as a commodity to be exploited, Beatrix Potter had the vision and environmental understanding to preserve a unique landscape. She bequeathed more than 4000 acres to the National Trust, the largest gift of that time, and was instrumental in preserving much of what we know of the Lake District National Park today.

### **You present Beatrix's as a life in three acts. Why?**

Beatrix had a talent for reinventing herself. She was

driven by her imagination, and by a desire to do something useful with her life. When one avenue of creativity and purposefulness was closed, she found another way. So when her contributions to natural science were dismissed, she turned her earlier letters to children into books, and finally found a publisher for what became the famous Little Books that have been read by generations the world over.

Crushed when her editor/fiancé died just a month after their engagement, Beatrix bought a working farm and began a new life in the Lake District as a farmer and sheep breeder. Eventually her country life became all-consuming and led to her visionary stewardship of the land.

### **You learned that after Miss Potter became Mrs. William Heelis, she was much less interested in producing more children's books. Why?**

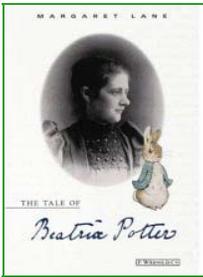
Beatrix was a fascinating combination of traditionalist and reformer. She always thought marriage was the "crown of a woman's life." When Norman Warne, her editor and fiancé, died in 1905 she was devastated and poured that grief into creativity in the Little Books that followed for the next decade. When William Heelis, the country solicitor who had first helped her buy property in the Lake District, asked her to marry him, she became Mrs. Heelis, farmer, sheep breeder, and countrywoman. Her life was now centered in the countryside, its farms, fells and sheep.

And she was heartily sick of rabbits. As she grew older, drawing and painting became increasingly difficult and she had enormous farms to manage and thousands of sheep and cattle to care for. She was ahead of the times in animal husbandry, and instrumental in preserving a unique breed of fell sheep, the Herdwick, in the Lake District. In 1928 she brought an immense property for the National Trust, and in her seventies personally managed it until the Trust could take it over. She actively worked to protect the unique architecture and crafts of the countryside.

### **Hill Top Farm has become a tourist mecca. How do you think Beatrix Potter would feel if she could see her legacy is playing out?**

Potter cared deeply about how she would be remembered, but never felt confident that she was taken seriously as a children's writer and illustrator. She would be endlessly gratified to see how popular her work remains, and how beloved her stories are. She would be amazed to see how her ideas of creative merchandising to extend her characters and tales for children has multiplied and expanded in to a multi-million dollar empire.

As far as

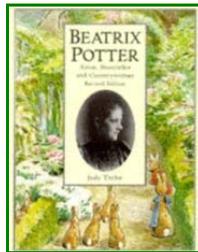


## A Tale of Three Biographers

By Susan Wittig Albert

Margaret Lane wrote the first biography, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, was published in 1946, only three years after Potter's death. Lane also wrote a second book, *The Magic Years of Beatrix Potter* (1978). Lane loved the "little books," and for her, they were the crowning achievements of the artist's life. The four decades after 1913, when Miss Potter became Mrs. William Heelis, stopped writing, and took up residence in a rural village in the Lake District were for Lane a regrettable afterward, a long slide into obscurity. "The inspiration faded," Lane says sadly. For her, Potter's creative life ended when she put down her pen and her brush.

We are given a broader picture of Potter's life by her second biographer, Judy Taylor (*Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller and Countrywoman*, 1986, revised edition 1996). Taylor went farther and deeper into Potter's life story, painting a broad picture for the general reader of the emerging young artist, the talented storyteller and maker of books, the happily married wife, the serious farmer, and the dedicated preservationist. Compared to the narrow focus of Lane's work, Taylor's biography gives us a much stronger sense of the whole of Potter's life, especially those long and happy decades after her marriage, and puts the early triumphs of the charming "nursery tales" into a clearer perspective. In addition, Taylor (who has devoted much of her life to the study of Potter's work) collected a large number of unpublished letters, documents, and photographs, and through a long-term association with Potter's publisher, Frederick Warne, had access to many other documents. Her work is better documented than Lane's, which often leaves us wondering on what evidence she bases her conclusions about Potter's life.



Linda Lear takes up where Judy Taylor left off. *Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature* is the most exhaustive and rigorous examination of Potter's life to date. Lear skillfully covers the old ground—the solitary childhood, the astonishing literary success, the dutiful attention to elderly parents, the retirement to marriage and rural farming life—but she breaks a good deal of new ground, as well, taking us deep into the experience of a gifted but very private woman who, as Lear says, had a "talent for reinventing herself." A trained and experienced biographer, Lear not only tells the riveting story of a woman who led three lives, but also documents her sources. Scholars will appreciate Lear's endnotes, sources, references, and lists of primary and secondary material. This is the first time in the history of Potter scholarship that a complete documentation has been made. It is invaluable.

One of the biographer's tasks is to correct the record where it is wrong. An unfortunate legacy of Margaret Lane's work is the mistaken idea that when Potter stopped drawing imaginary animals, she stopped being creative. Both Taylor and Lear demonstrate that throughout Potter's long life, her imagination was fueled by a passion for nature. From her earliest childhood to the time of her death, as Linda Lear shows, Potter was passionately, imaginatively, and creatively engaged with life. Lear also succeeds in placing her subject in the larger context of English social and intellectual history. Given the religious, political, and social environments within which Beatrix grew up, it is easier to understand the seeming docility with which she usually (but not always!) bowed to her parents' wishes—and to applaud her courage when she breaks free.

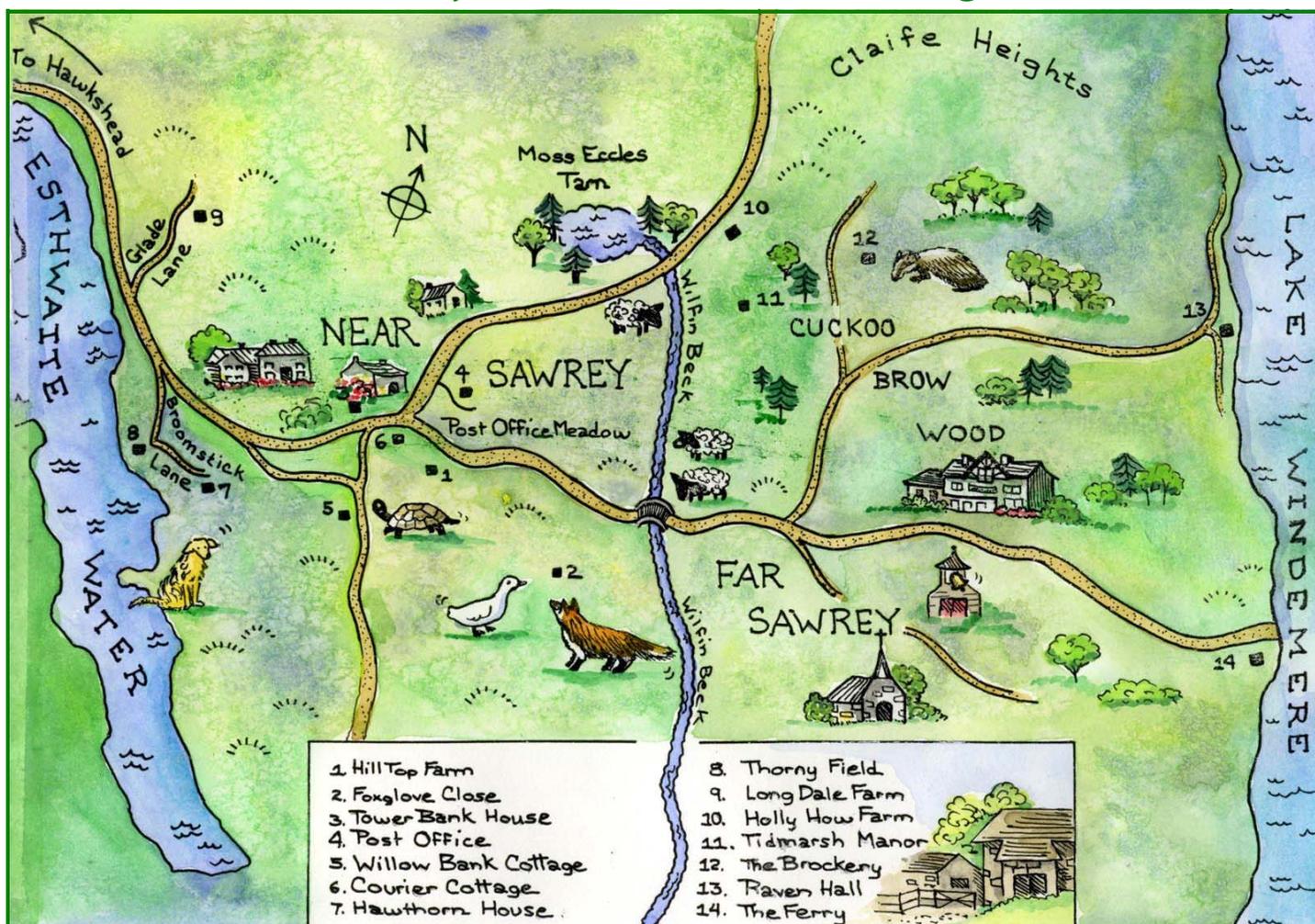
Writing biography is an enormous challenge that requires a commitment of years, sometimes of a lifetime. In the case of Beatrix Potter, we're fortunate indeed to have three such different views. Taken together, they richly illuminate the life and work of a remarkable woman.

Hill Top Farm is concerned Beatrix wanted it to be a museum of her life and work in the countryside. She herself arranged her china and porcelain, her artwork, and her antique furniture as she wanted them to be viewed. She would be deeply gratified to know that thousands of tourists come each year to find Tom Kitten's garden and to look for Jemima Puddle-duck's missing eggs. She would be equally proud that some of the farms she donated to the National Trust offer teas for tourists, allowing them to visit the old houses and see fell farming at first hand.

But Beatrix Potter also understood that the Trust faced a precarious balancing act in preserving a unique landscape and at the same time providing for a self-sufficient agriculture. Her imaginative stewardship of the land is as much a part of her creative legacy as her art and stories for children.

*Linda Lear, a professor of environmental history and author of the prize-winning biography **Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature**, is an enthusiastic horticulturalist and*

## Map for *The Tale of Hawthorn House* The Fourth of the *Beatrix Potter Cottage Tales*



### *The Village of Sawrey: Is it Real?*

One of the questions readers ask most often about the Cottage Tales is “How much of it is real?”

When it comes to the setting of the stories, the little village of Sawrey is very real! The houses that Beatrix and the villagers inhabit—Hill Top, Buckle Yeat, Courier Cottage, Anvil Cottage, High Green Gate, and so on—all existed in the little village of Sawrey during the time of the Cottage Tales, from 1905-1913. There are others, too, over two dozen houses and other structures in all.

In fact, all these houses still exist in the village, thanks to the National Trust, which now owns and maintains them. I think it is one of the unique features of this village: that we can see it now, a full

century later, pretty much as it was when Miss Potter found it so irresistible. The village was, she said, “as nearly perfect a little place as I ever lived in.”

My favorite house is Hill Top, of course. But in Book One, we also peek into Anvil Cottage, Belle Green, Castle Farm. In Book Two, Tower Bank House. In Book Three, the Sunnyside Cottages and the Post Office. And now, in Book Four, the Tower Bank Arms. As a source, I’ve relied on the Beatrix Potter Society’s booklet, “Near Sawrey: An Illustrated Map with Descriptive Text,” as well as note I’ve made during my visits.

Of course, I don’t know exactly how these places looked a century ago. But I can imagine. And so, I hope, can you!—*Susan Wittig Albert*



**Susan Wittig Albert** is the author of *The Cottage Tales of Beatrix Potter* and the China Bayles herbal mysteries. She and her husband Bill, writing as Robin Paige, have co-authored a dozen Victorian-Edwardian mysteries featuring Kate and Charles Sheridan.

For a full list of the Alberts’ books, visit their website at [www.mysterypartners.com](http://www.mysterypartners.com)