

Beatrix Potter's letters to Americans during World War II

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Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, I was struck by how contemporary Beatrix's letters are in both sensibility and sense.

Beatrix Potter liked Americans. She found her friends in the 'States held an intelligent admiration of her text and art. She wrote to her American friend Bertha Miller, '...never does anyone outside your perfidiously complimentary nation write to tell me that I write good prose!'

Beatrix's letters to her American friends during World War II are a blend of farm updates, the weather, humorous social observations, and troubled concerns as the war progressed. She was well-abreast and clear-sighted in her observations. She had many American friends, but I'll focus on the correspondence with three.

Anne Carroll Moore was the Superintendent of the Department of Work with Children for the New York Public Library at the beginning of the twentieth century. She was a pioneer in making books in public libraries available to children. On a lecture tour in France and England in 1921 Anne and her companion, an 8-inch wooden Dutch doll named Nicholas Knickerbocker, were invited to tea by Beatrix. The three of them got along so well that the visit became an invitation to supper and stay the night...and then another night. The most detailed and personal recounting of their visit was written by Nicholas himself in *Nicholas and the Golden Goose* (Putnam, 1932). Anne and Beatrix corresponded for over twenty years, until Beatrix's death.

Bertha Mahony Miller lived in Boston. She founded *The Horn Book* in 1924, a highly respected magazine dedicated to promoting excellence in children's literature. Although many of Beatrix's letters to Bertha during the war years were often about content by Beatrix for *The Horn Book*, Beatrix also shared her thoughts about books, the farm and, always, the weather. Beatrix and Bertha corresponded for more than fifteen years.

Beatrix especially missed the numerous visits from Marian Frazer Harris Perry of Philadelphia and her niece, Betty Harris Stevens. Of all Beatrix's American friends, Marian was the closest to Beatrix in age and circumstance – both born in 1866 to wealthy Victorian families, their values were similar, and their personalities cohesive. Beatrix recounted to Marian's niece, Betty, after one visit, 'Do you remember wriggling a large car past a large bus on a very narrow twisty lane near Buttermere? Your aunt had a confiding faith in your skill as a chauffeureuse which emboldened *me* to keep my seat.' Their correspondence began in 1927 when Marian bought two drawings from Beatrix to support her effort to purchase land along Windermere. They corresponded until Beatrix's death in 1943.

In Beatrix's own voice and stockings, here is how she saw the war unfold:

Chamberlain signed the Munich Agreement with Hitler in September 1938; it stated that Hitler could annex only the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Four days later, Beatrix wrote to Marian Perry, 'If Mr. Chamberlain believes in [Hitler's] promises he must be an incurable optimist'.

To Anne Carroll Moore: 'We do not like Mr. Chamberlain.... The serious thing is his want of any proper sense of responsibility *now*, which has simply thrown the advising of necessary defence measures into the hands of [the] Labour party.... No one would object at a time of crisis; but imagine having Barrow low class Irish – perhaps 6 or 8 – quartered in one's house for months!'

1939, to Mrs Perry: 'The risk is – whether Hitler can *control* indefinitely long the powers of evil which he has inspired. Take Japan for instance... [they] may at any moment commit some atrocity which will almost oblige America and England to punish them.... It is a pity your Roosevelt is so impulsive to domestic politics.... Unless America seriously prepares – she will someday be at the mercy of Japan....' Unfortunately, Beatrix did not have our President's ear.

May 1940, two days before Dunkirk, when the British Expeditionary Forces were in Flanders, Beatrix wrote to Anne Carroll Moore: 'The blue bells are very lovely and the hawthorn blossom like snow on the green hedges and the cuckoo calling; a world of beauty that will survive – and Freedom will survive, whatever happens to us.... Of course it would be idle to conceal that we are very anxious....'

The day after the Fleet of Small Ships finished its rescue from Dunkirk, Beatrix wrote again to Anne Carroll Moore: 'We are living through an anxious time. Last week was horrible. Then there was a reaction of relief and pride when the B.E.F got out of Flanders.... I have hardly patience to write a letter to U.S.A.... American help is not going to be in time to turn the scale before August. Good bye.' Beatrix was aware that the Neutrality Act

passed by our Congress after World War I tied President Roosevelt's hands from aiding Britain, but she wasn't happy about it.

After France fell to Germany, and on the heels of Dunkirk, Beatrix grew very concerned for the safety of the Duke daughters and two young Heelis nephews. She hoped to coordinate the evacuation of the children to America with the help of Marian Perry, her niece Betty and Anne Carroll Moore. At the end of June 1940 cables went back and forth between Beatrix, Marian Perry and Anne Carroll Moore. Together, the women worked out a possible plan to evacuate the children to the 'States. Marian agreed to act as sponsor for the Duke girls and the Tweedie boys. Anne would find lodging in a New York hotel, if they landed in New York before travelling to Philadelphia. In the end, with too many complications involving parental escort for the youngest Tweedie nephew, the families decided to keep the children in England. Afterwards, Beatrix wrote to Marian, 'I am writing yet again to thank you and Betty for all your intended kindness.... I do not think physically this child migration is now vitally necessary – (I agree with Mr. Churchill in weighing the risk of the crossing).'

The risks were great, given the nature of Hitler's navy. Shortly after the plan to evacuate the children was dropped, the steamer SS Volendam, headed for Halifax carrying 320 children, was torpedoed in August 1940. Less than three weeks later, the steamer SS City of Benares, carrying ninety children to Canada, was torpedoed; it sank. Churchill cancelled the evacuee programme. One of our Members was due to travel on the Benares. Thankfully, a case of the mumps kept him and his sister from boarding.

1941, to Mrs Perry: 'I confess I went to bed in my clothes, but I slept like a top between noises. One becomes hardened to it. I have not taken my stockings off all winter except of course to wash.... Tanks are the nightmare. We can laugh about bombing, but if German tanks got a hold in this island – God help us! It's an asset that our road system is old fashioned.'

Autumn, 1941 in a letter to Anne Carroll Moore: 'We have had a very pleasant summer apart from the war'. In the same letter: 'We have not been feeling very cheerful, but it seems as though wind and snow and winter frosts may save Russia. America is going through the stage we did at first – talking a little too big but not ready or able to save other countries from going under. You who visited devastated France after the last war will know what a fate it is. We have had noisy nights even in this remote district, as the German planes go over on passage elsewhere, and some times unload their bombs when running for home; but there has been very little damage.'

In late December 1941, Beatrix wrote to Bertha Miller: 'It seems an age since "Dec. 7th". We could hear your President's every word distinctly. His speech was fine; direct and forcible in its simple statements. Only, all the time I listened, I kept thinking – how many "Dec. 7th's" there have been in Europe?'

Prior to Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt had repeatedly and emphatically told the American public that support for Britain and its Navy was the only way to prevent domination of the Atlantic and Pacific by Germany and Japan. It took Pearl Harbor to get the U.S. in. Knowing his mother's country would now come to Britain's defence, Churchill slept through the night for the first time in two years.

31 January 1942, to Anne Carroll Moore: 'Your letter and the snowy trees reached me two days ago, in a world equally white.... Your country is truly in the war at last! How glad we are to know the American troops are in Ulster! I have never thought that invasion of Britain could be successful; but while any landing was being beaten off it would be horrible for people living as near the coast as we do here. [Were there to be a German invasion] 'The orders have always been to "stay put" ... but the choice of sitting indoors - or taking to the woods is not attractive to the aged!'

Letter to Bertha Mahony Miller, 18 June 1942: 'Your charming present arrived unexpectedly this morning – *Lemon Juice!* Also butter, dextrose, onion flakes, chocolate, bacon and cheese. I was very thankful for a tin of lemon juice in a Christmas parcel... It helped my cough when I had bronchitis, all through the month of May (which is too good a month to waste when one is nearly 76).... I shall...sprinkle the dextrose on my breakfast porridge, to promote energy as promised on the label. ...my energy only went so far as sorting books – rereading once – before consigning to the pulp collection. I dislike the task, even if one does not read them often, they are friends.' [Which explains why we all have such a hard time winnowing out books from our own shelves.]

To Mrs Perry, in late 1942: 'The time has come for posting Christmas letters. There does not seem much to write about – except the weather, which has been disappointing all through the so-called summer.... We have had peaceful nights for a long time up here.... I hope you are feeling better and that we shall meet again when there is Peace.' (They did not.)

By 1943, Beatrix was able to see the war turning in the Allies' favour. To Mrs Miller, 'I have survived to see Hitler beaten past hope of recovery!'

Her last letter to Marian Perry: 'Your delightful Christmas remembrances have arrived safely.... I had a bad time with bronchitis in September; I am going about, much as usual now, but rather feeling the weather.... When we think what we have escaped and survived compared with other lands – I don't know how we have got through alive.'

After Beatrix's death, William Heelis wrote to her American friends, in response to their sympathy letters, similar words: 'Your friendship and interchange of letters was great happiness to her.'

News of Beatrix's death did not reach the 'States until early January of 1944. Her obituary in the New York *Herald Tribune* has not gone stale:

When on Friday morning the news came to America that Beatrix Potter was dead there must have been a great hurrying to bookshelves and nursery cupboards to see if there were still there a well-worn copy of *Peter Rabbit* or *The Tailor of Gloucester*, or any of that score of little books so dear to English and American children. And perhaps some mother sat down with one of them before she went off to market with her ration book, and leafing through it remembered how many times she had read it to a boy overseas now, in Africa or New Guinea....