

The importance of letters in telling a life

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[Please note that this is not quite word-for-word what I said, in the end. My talk came at the end of the afternoon and part of my brief was to round up content from the other speakers, so I referenced their research on several occasions with off-the-cuff remarks and quotes not included here. My talk was also followed by a lively floor discussion about how it is that so many of Beatrix Potter's letters have survived (and what she would think of that) – and more general ones about the keeping of letters, the tradition of collecting 'autographs' and other related subjects.

I have also attached to this the information sheet I made for the tables at the meeting – listing the sources for Beatrix Potter's letters.]

Thank you to Rowena, Meredith and Angela for those fascinating insights into life in Cumbria during the Second World War. What is it about letters that is so irresistible – in this case the personal window on to a public world? But we all get a shiver when we see a signed document from Elizabeth I, a love letter from Nelson to Lady Hamilton, the letters from Churchill to his beloved wife Clemmie, or any of those from the endlessly fascinating Mitford sisters – or Beatrix Potter's own correspondence.

Earlier this year astonishing prices were paid for a number of letters written by some great French writers, ranging from Baudelaire and Flaubert, to Victor Hugo, and covering personal relationships with mothers or lovers, as well as the cause of women's rights and the horror of capital punishment. More relevant to recent events here is a letter, estimated at £3,000 to £10,000, from Thomas Hardy – notoriously anti-establishment – who chose to stay safely in his private members club on the day when George V was crowned, in order to avoid the crowds and what he called the 'Coronation Circus'. And many of you will have followed the recent fascinating revelations in T S Eliot's letters to Emily Hale (more than 1,000 of them) – deposited at Princeton University Library in 1956 but only recently allowed to be unsealed. Eliot's biographers have already made good use of the new information about their relationship and her influence on his great poem 'The Waste Land', and I am sure other biographers will have profited from the sale or discovery of other letters, in the same way that Potter's biographers – Judy Taylor, Linda Lear and Margaret Lane and others – have done.

Those T S Eliot letters did not have to be purchased by Princeton, of course (though I can't begin to imagine their value), but I am sure there are plenty of institutions both in the US and here who are wishing they had been the original repository for those letters! Competition for the archives of famous people is fierce and 'legacy' is big business.

But monetary value aside, why are letters so sought after? They offer opportunities for education, heritage, history and preservation, and enhance collections in universities, libraries and elsewhere through research opportunities of all kinds. Some of that research will be for the telling of a life, where the content of the letter is the interest, as in those eye-wateringly expensive French letters and as the

talks today have illustrated so well. These have all relied on personal letters to describe events and places in the Lake District during wartime, so they have a place in the telling of the **history** of a particular time, as well as of the people who wrote and received them.

What does a letter tell us about the sender or the person receiving the letter? What is its tone, its purpose? Is it revealing a business matter, a personal matter, a general point of view, an account of a particular event or place? The possibilities are endless. But the fact is that each letter adds to what we know about a person.

When it comes to Beatrix Potter, we have her *Journal* of course (intended to be private), and we have her little books and her artwork, and her great Lake District legacy. All have their place in the telling of her life and can reveal a certain amount about her character and her achievements. But – for most of us – Beatrix only becomes a rounded person through her letters, because these document all aspects of her life – and then they go further. We begin to understand what she thought about life, other people and events; what was important to her or considered frivolous; why she made certain decisions; who she liked and disliked or trusted and respected or dismissed. We learn about family connections, business ideas and deals, personal losses and triumphs, political and religious views, farming matters and the companionship of dogs, husbands and neighbours. And what we learn is nuanced by when it was written, and to whom, telling us more about her character and relationships in subtle ways. They are gold dust to a biographer.

For example, we see that Beatrix's letters were more or less formal, and more or less detailed, depending on who she was writing to – and see how she signs herself; all sorts of variations in both greetings and name. 'My dear...' and 'yours affectionately' or 'with love, yours affectionately' to Louie Choyce, for example, but more formally 'Dear' and 'yours sincerely' to Samuel Cunningham (always Mr. Cunningham). Both are friends and regular correspondents, but their intimacy is defined. Plenty of information in the little details...

We are extremely fortunate in having access to such huge numbers of letters written by Beatrix. Today we have heard about a fraction of them, from a few war-time years in her life, taken from just some of the relevant publications – *The Choyce Letters*, *Dear Mr. Cunningham* and Jane Morse's *Beatrix Potter's Americans*. But in addition to Judy Taylor's *Beatrix Potter's Letters* and *Letters to Children*, we also have *Beatrix Potter's Farming Friendship*, the letters to Joe Moscrop, and *Dear Ivy*, *Dear June*, for example, as well as all the unpublished letters collected by Judy, and the unpublished Nicholson letters now deposited in the V&A. And the Warne Archive has letters relating to all her little books and so on. Every letter tells us something different.

The letters to Joe Moscrop are mostly farming matters, but of course the war intrudes – Beatrix discusses conscription and call-up problems affecting labour on the farms, and unreasonable dictates from the Ministry of Agriculture ('such nonsense'), as well as the effect of the German U-boat blockade – 'this submarine job is a serious outlook for food' – and petrol rationing. All practical aspects of her character and her life shown here to a fellow countryman, but she and Moscrop had a friendship as well, hinted at in this letter she wrote to him on 26 February 1942: 'The war news has been exciting and cheering. I don't quite hold with the bell ringing [this had been to mark the Allied victory at El Alamein and was the first occasion on which church bells had been rung since the threat of invasion in 1940]. It was a

victory; but there will be hard knocks yet – and the misery in Europe is terrible to think of. And many parents are mourning sons – dead or missing.’ The very last letter she is known to have written in December 1943 is also to him – owned by the Society and currently on display at the V&A. ‘I write a line to shake you by the hand, our friendship has been entirely pleasant. I am very ill with bronchitis.’ What a lot that tells us, another illustration of how the letters enhance the telling of Beatrix’s life.

In contrast is a quote from a letter from *Dear Ivy, Dear June* to her old friend Ivy Steel – originally from London and now living in Canada – also about the war. She wrote to her in September 1943 about the Duke daughters (‘who I was fond of as children’), and who we heard about earlier in the war, from Meredith, when Beatrix hoped her American friends might help them to safety. The letter is more personal and gossipy – woman to woman – than the letter to Moscrop, though just as informative; ‘... the elder, Rosemary, seemed likely to be an independent capable modern girl; and directly she was old enough – into the ATS and the Middle East. Her parents did not know where she was... and they had not seen her for more than 18 months. One can only hope she may learn sense & experience before making a wrong choice of a husband. Her sister, who was a steadier character is in the Wrens – the Navy service, which has a good name. Many of the girls get very rough & rackets. One wonders how they will ever settle down again to home life.’

There is keen observation here of the situation for young women in war time – though I am sure she would not have classed Rowena’s mother as ‘rough & rackets’, and we know that she did settle after the war – but the letter also reveals that Beatrix was of a different and more old-fashioned generation, perhaps not fully understanding how young people needed to let off steam when living under wartime pressure. Again – very revealing about aspects of her character, I feel?

The Society is the proud owner of a number of Beatrix Potter’s letters, of course, which we looked at in the Linder Lecture earlier this year. Two of the recently acquired letters to Katherine Brooke, detailing much about local and community life in and around Sawrey, were written during the war – this one in 1943 – and offer further insight into Beatrix: practical concern on the one hand about the distances that families and children would have to travel to visit the nursing centre – ‘a very tiring road for young children to walk, and a killing task to push a pram – twice – up the hill’, but critical on the other hand of wasting rationed petrol to take children to school by taxi, and of the ‘vulgar world’ of cocktail parties!

So, two final points to consider when thinking about letters and lives, particularly in relation to Beatrix.

The first is – what would Beatrix Potter herself think of the fact that so many of her letters have survived and are now in the public domain? Not a lot, is probably the answer. She might have been pleased to know that her skill and reputation as a storyteller and artist has survived – also as a mycologist – and to realise how much her farming and Lake District legacy is valued, and I am sure she would have expected her business correspondence with Warne to survive in its archive. But I think she would be astonished – and shocked – to know that so many of her correspondents had kept her personal letters, and that these were now available to all and sundry, and informing the many books and biographies about aspects of her life not connected with her work. Gold dust for us, but perhaps not for her? She was a very private person really, so the biographies would probably shock her as much as the letters!

We know that she herself burnt letters once she had answered them, and did not think them worth keeping, hence the fact that nearly all the Potter correspondence is totally one-sided. But she of all people also understood the importance and value of heritage and history – was fascinated by that of her own family and took an interest in that of others, helping to preserve items of interest, including letters (for instance in connection with Wordsworth). Rather to my surprise, I found an unexpected comment in a 1939 letter written from Liverpool hospital [where she had been having an operation] to Daisy Hammond and Cecily Mills, who lived next door in the Castle: ‘Tell William to be careful burning at C.C. [she means old unwanted papers etc] I very nearly burnt some autographs the other day.’ What autographs, I wonder? What was she collecting? Perhaps she would have minded less than we think that we have been digging through her life?

But I have often wondered how it is that so much has survived, and if we have time this is something we could discuss, since it leads to my final point and the one that concerns us all.

How will biographers and historians of the future be able to bring their subjects to life in quite the same way if they have no letters to read? Has anyone in this room written a proper letter this week, or when did you last write one? I have written one – a letter of condolence – and I have received one old-fashioned thank you letter from a nephew with a new baby, to whom I sent a present; also a holiday post-card from Portugal and some early Christmas cards from Society friends. Nothing with actual news and views that might reveal something of my correspondent or of me and be of use in the future telling of a life.

Apart from those few items, just hundreds of emails in my Inbox and my Outbox, as well as lots of WhatsApp messages, which I am sure you all have, too. And what use will emails be to biographers of the future? How long will these be kept? Do you store yours? Who will have access to them? Do they ‘tell a life’ in the same way as a letter?

Of course, good biographers will find new voices to add to the mix, through interviews and other people’s diaries and media reports and so on, but they will find many fewer letters of any importance, and the change has happened in our lifetimes. Take Rowena’s mother, for example – would someone today posted abroad, or living and working away from home, write letters back to family and friends in the same way, or would they email, WhatsApp, Facetime, Zoom or telephone? And what would happen to that communication? Would an employer write letters like those Beatrix wrote to Joe Moscrop, or would friends like Beatrix and Louie Choyce bother with letters when they could communicate electronically? More pertinent still – how much cheaper to connect with friends in America if no postage stamp were involved!

It seems to me that we will be in danger of losing the genuine personal aspect of an individual behind a more public face. Prime Ministers or Presidents, footballers and ‘celebrities’, will all keep some sort of record for public view, hoping for big advances when they write their memoirs. But the writing and keeping of the equivalent of a diary for this purpose is not at all the same as the writing or keeping of letters as the only means of communication, and this is sad. I like to think that some children are being sent modern picture letters from a Beatrix of today – perhaps an aunt or a grandmother – but I think it very unlikely that their parents are either writing or receiving proper letters. Perhaps all future biographies will be a mixture of fact and fiction, a bit like ‘The Crown’ on television, so we should count

ourselves lucky that Beatrix lived when she did and that the recipients of her letters understood their value!

Sources for Beatrix Potter letters

Beatrix Potter: Letters to Children, Harvard College Library, NY, 1966

Beatrix Potter's Americans: Selected Letters, ed Jane Morse, Horn Book, 1982

Beatrix Potter's Farming Friendship: Lake District Letters to Joseph Moscrop 1926-1943,
ed Judy Taylor, BPS, 1998

Beatrix Potter's Letters, ed Judy Taylor, Warne, revised edition 2001

Choyce Letters, The, ed Judy Taylor, BPS, 1994

Dear Ivy, Dear June: Letters from Beatrix Potter, The Friends of the Osborne and Lillian H
Smith Collections, Toronto Public Library, 1977

Dear Mr. Cunningham, ed Miranda Tisdale, Clive Scoular, 2012

Letters to Children from Beatrix Potter, ed Judy Taylor, Warne, 1992

Studies VIII – Beatrix Potter as Writer and Illustrator, BPS, 1999 – see 'Beatrix Potter as
Letter Writer', Judy Taylor

The Beatrix Potter Collection of Lloyd Cotsen, Cotsen Occasional Press, 2004

Yours Affectionately, Peter Rabbit: Miniature Letters by Beatrix Potter, Warne, 1983

The BPS *Newsletters* and *J&Ns* are always worth looking at and have numerous references to letters, both published and unpublished (sometimes prompted by their appearance at sales and auctions), as well as reviews of some of the above books and reports by Judy Taylor and others on aspect of the Beatrix Potter letters.

In her *Studies VIII* talk, Judy also draws attention to the fact that Margaret Lane (*The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, Warne, 1946) must have had access to letters that have since disappeared, as it has not been possible to trace all the quotes in her book, and John Heelis quoted from some unknown/unpublished Heelis letters in his *The Tale of Mrs William Heelis* (revised edition 1999). Most tantalisingly, there are references in Jane Quinby's 1954 *Beatrix Potter: A Bibliographical Check List* to twenty-two letters to Janie Watt-Brown, from 1920 to 1939. All attempts to trace either Miss Watt-Brown or the letters have failed and they are something we all dream of finding!