

Beatrix Potter, Peter Rabbit, and Pre-Raphaelitism

Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) is well known as the creator and illustrator of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and some twenty-five other children's books about animals. What was not known about Beatrix Potter until quite recently, after the decoding of her *Journal*, is the fact that she had also been an astute critic and partial imitator of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Her opinions varied over the years from distasteful, especially for Rossetti, to a self-confessed discipleship. In the last year of her life she wrote her publishers, Frederick Warne & Co., who had no idea that she had kept so full a journal, that an essay by Janet Adam Smith in *The Listener* compared her water colors and sketches to Constable's. To her it was all "rubbish" and "bosh." "I have too much sense to resent a suggestion that my painting manner is not original, but founded in another painter's manner; but I think it is silly to suggest it is founded on Constable—a great artist with a broad style." And she added, "When I was young it was still permissible to admire the Pre-Raphaelites; their somewhat niggling but absolutely genuine admiration for copying natural details did certainly influence me."¹

One of the last detailed entries in her *Journal* records the death of Millais: "Thursday, August 13th [1896]. Sir John Millais died August 13th. . . . I saw him last November, walking in Knightsbridge, 'how is my little friend?, can't speak, can't speak'. He looked as handsome and well as ever, he was one of the handsomest men I ever saw, apart from the defect of his eye, and the odd mark across his forehead." Then, remembering her many visits to Millais' studio, Potter added, "If a great portrait painter's criticism is of any interest this is it. . . . I was a little like his daughter Carrie, at that time a fine handsome girl, but my face was spoiled by the length of my nose and upper lip. . . . At Perth. . . . he really paid me a compliment for he said that 'plenty of people can draw, but you and my son John have observation'."²

Beatrix Potter's talent for observation had

been developed in her school-room studio at her parents' house in Bolton Gardens. The studio was also something of a zoo with its rabbit, mice, hedgehog—at least it was smaller and better cared for than Rossetti's menagerie at Cheyne Walk had been. After brief art lessons as a young girl, Potter spent endless hours drawing rabbits in all poses as well as mice and other small animals. As she grew older she became fascinated with fungi, and drew and painted them in minute detail; a collection of 270 fungi paintings is at the Armit Library in Ambleside.³

It was her love of art that made Potter especially delighted to accompany her father on his many visits to Millais' studio. Rupert Potter, a Victorian gentleman who had inherited considerable wealth, was an amateur photographer of ability. In 1885 Beatrix Potter records in the *Journal*: "Mr. Millais came here 15th [November] in the evening to get papa to photograph that little boy of Effie's . . . with a bowl of soap suds and all that, a pipe, it's called *A Child's World* [later the famous *Bubbles*]. . . . I want just to compare it, I get this little thing (the photo of the picture) and I hold in my hand and compare it with the life, and I can see where the drawing's wrong" (J, 154).

Apparently Millais thought highly of Rupert Potter's photographic skill—"Mr. Millais says the professionals aren't fit to hold a candle to papa" (J, 63)—and desired his assistance in matters both large and small. When painting *Pomona*, he requested a "photo of an apple tree"; when painting the *Drummer-Boy*, he wanted "a running stream to assist him with the landscape" (J, 63).

For all this obliging assistance Mr. Potter enjoyed the friendship of a gifted, popular painter and the incidental advice that could be passed on to his daughter: "Papa asked Mr. Millais about mixing paints, and he very kindly said what I should get. . . . Mr. Millais is very careful what he uses and says he believes his pictures will last to the end of time, and not crack like Reynolds'" (J, 32).