

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Nature's Calling: Expanding the Legacy of Beatrix Potter in the Construction, Contestation and Contemporary Preservation of the Lake District

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**Abstract:**

Beatrix Potter was arguably the most well-known British children's author of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her work not only captured the landscape of the Cumbrian region, but also encouraged dynamic encounters with the natural world through interactions between the human and non-human. Unlike many other children's authors of her day, she took a relational, embodied approach to landscape immersing herself and her characters in a world that was realistic, yet unadorned. Through examples of her literary and later life's work, I argue that Beatrix Potter essentially ensured that the English pastoral remained emplaced not only in the imagination, but in the everyday lives of her readers, her neighbours and the many generations who would later visit the Lake District. In this paper, by making use of Potter's Will and through examining her later years and reputation, I suggest that an impetus for local stewardship and long-term preservation of the Lakeland district and its regional ecology are clearly displayed. I posit that it was her foresight in understanding the careful balance needed between conservation, heritage, culture and economy, that propelled others to begin the transition needed to protect the Lake District's future through the achievement of its national and then international preservation status.

**Keywords:** Beatrix Potter, Lake District, landscape, preservation, stewardship, World Heritage.

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## Introduction

Although well recognised for her children's books and illustrations, Helen Beatrix Potter is perhaps less well known for her work in protecting rural Cumbrian life in the Lake District. Moving to the region in 1913 after her marriage to William Heelis, she was to become a large local landowner and sheep farmer, spending the next thirty years of her life ensuring that her final legacy would be one of stewardship and preservation.

Hardwicke Rawnsley (1851-1920), the vicar of a church in Keswick, who befriended Potter when she was in her teens, not only encouraged her early writings, based on the everyday elements she saw in the Lake District, but also influenced her by his passionate attitudes towards preservation and rural life. In short, he was to play a significant role in guiding and supporting her life-long thinking about conservation. As co-founder of the National Trust along with the great social reformer Octavia Hill (1838-1912), who understood the importance of access to nature for human wellbeing, and Robert Hunter (1834 -1913), who worked tirelessly to preserve the right for everyone to access common land and to protect historic buildings, Potter was in good company. Having been exposed early in life to art, architecture, literature, and natural history through visits to the London Natural History Museum, the National Gallery and her grandfather Potter's large estate, Camfield in Perthshire, Scotland, her role in recognising the often-contested interplay between farming, landscape protection, tourism and nature appreciation in the complex space of the Lake District, was to be a significant one.

In what follows, I undertake to show how right from her earliest works, it was Potter's intention by accurately capturing the minutiae of nature, to bring it to the attention of generations of city-pent children, who like herself lived mainly solitary lives cloistered in the houses of London and beyond. What began for her as a means of escape, soon became a very successful enterprise that would not only allow her to slowly extricate herself from her parents, but also to begin the life as a hill country farmer she had long envisaged for herself since her adolescent visits to the region. This pursuit in the last 30 years of her life allowed her to play an active role in helping defend local landscape, protecting the locally iconic Herdwick sheep variety as well as conserving regionally important historic buildings.

Why and how Potter came to be such a passionate defender of the Lakelands is discussed throughout this paper as are her impressions of the region and the legacy she left behind to protect it. As hers was a life where personal and intellectual freedoms were found in nature, this paper concentrates mainly on her adult years and how her ideas and those of others about stewardship and preservation contributed to the Lake District eventually being awarded 'Outstanding Universal Value' under the current United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) protection scheme. This paper also builds upon the early work of Squire (1993, 1994) and others on literary tourism in the Lake District and offers a timely update on the debates surrounding contemporary heritage protection. I argue that it is important to recognise the ever-increasing role of tourism in the region; as Potter herself acknowledged from about 1929 onwards, holidaymakers with cars and boats were already clogging the area and predicted that more like them would come. It was her long-held hope though that in visiting her properties, and others like them, she might 'educate the public' and in doing so, might also 'preserve the character of the countryside' (Lear 2007:176).

### Answering nature's calling – Potter's early-middle years

Helen Beatrix Potter was born on 28 July 1866 in the London suburb of South Kensington. After her birth, Beatrix and later her brother Bertram, were installed in the nursery on the third floor of the family's home, which over time transformed into a school room, an artist's studio, and then finally an apartment for the adult Beatrix who lived there until the age of thirty-nine. Her childhood and adolescent years were solitary ones, but from the age of four onwards, her parents started the tradition of heading north for the summer months allowing the young Beatrix relative freedom to explore the nearby woods and countryside and encouraging her to sketch all she saw around her. Some years later, the family holidayed in the Lake District near Keswick, where they continued to return for the next twenty-one years (see: Figure 1).



Figure 1 The English Lake District [map by Brendan Halliburton]

Potter's love of all elements of nature was apparent from the beginning; her acute awareness and observations of its different scents and smells and the various behavioural traits of many species native to local woodlands are clearly embedded in many of her children's books and illustrated with equal faithfulness. Although her characters are anthropomorphised (she is of course writing for children), she moves with ease between reality and fiction. We are told that *Mr Bouncer* (the Badger) for example, is very 'smelly', that *Jeremy Fisher* – a frog – has a house among

the native buttercups (which can only be found along the edges of wet woodlands) and that *Timmy Tiptoes* – a Grey Squirrel – buries his nuts in the forest floor. As Lepri (2020: 292) reminds us, this was also the age of Charles Darwin, so Potter's animals are drawn accurately, rather than stylised. Even so, in her works we:

...see hedgehogs with aprons and mice in overcoats between geraniums, water lilies, lilies, violets and snapdragons meticulously reproduced: each fantastic element is placed in an extraordinary setting in which nothing is left to chance but gives an account of a rigorous and systematic investigation.

Even in her children's stories, Potter tried to preserve and cultivate an interest in the natural world and to educate children about the many non-human species inhabiting the landscape. She did not believe in hiding the fearsome reality of life, however, especially in the interactions between the human and non-human and between species which could sometimes seem harsh, especially to city dwellers. For example, in the opening pages of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the children are told that their father had 'an accident' and 'was put in a pie by Mrs McGregor'; in *The Tale of Pigling Bland* (1913), one of the pigs is sent to market and destined to become bacon; in *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, he loses his tail to an owl; and in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-duck* (1908), she is deceived by a fox who tries to steal her eggs and nearly has her for dinner too! Thus, while Potter wrote to amuse, she also wrote to inform children of the realities of life. Naturalists such as Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) famous for his *Land Ethic* would have approved of Potter's realistic approach to writing as he too was concerned about the disconnect occurring between children and their knowledge of where food and fibre came from.

Potter's success as a children's author was ultimately to take her by surprise, but being ever practical, she realised by age thirty-six, that this was the means she had been looking for to slowly extricate herself from her parents and to find liberation. Alison Lurie in her book, *Don't tell the Grown-ups* (1990: 90), notes the significance of this, when she suggests:

Nearly ninety years ago, in London, a woman escaped from prison with the help of a rabbit. It was not a modern prison, with facilities for education and recreation and a chance of parole, but a tall, dark, stuffy Victorian house; and the prisoner, who had been confined there for most of her thirty-six years, was under sentence for life. The rabbit's name, of course, was Peter.

In 1903, with *Peter Rabbit* having sold 50,000 copies, Potter started her venture towards independence by buying a field where she wished to graze cattle (Lane 1946). This was followed in 1905 by her purchase of the thirty-four-acre Hill Top Farm (Figure 2), with its seventeenth century farmhouse, near Sawrey. Here, she was determined to farm the land and, in its purchase, thereby return to the countryside her ancestors had so embraced. It was also on this property, and others to follow, that she was to understand what "stewardship" and "freedom" fully entailed.



Figure 2 Hill-Top Farm [photograph by author]

Although she bought Hill Top farm in 1905, it took nearly a decade before Potter was able to live independently on the property, as she was still not free of her Victorian-era parents. Even though she was thirty-nine years of age and financially secure, as she was unmarried her parents still saw it as their duty to protect her. Thomson (2007: 211) suggests that ‘the best access she could manage was to persuade her father and mother to rent nearby houses during the summers so that she could make the daily hike to her beloved farm’. Despite the restrictions on her life at this time, Potter continued to purchase adjacent properties ‘putting together a series of parcels that protected the watersheds, ancient woodlands and the open fells’ where sheep grazed (Thomson 2007: 211).

In 1912, when her property agent and solicitor friend William Heelis proposed to the then forty-six-year-old Beatrix, she happily accepted and in 1913, Beatrix Potter became ‘Mrs William Heelis of Sawrey’ as she was known locally for the next thirty years of her life (Taylor, 1996). It wasn’t until 1914, however, (when her father died), that she was finally able to move her mother up to the Lake District, and make her own home at Castle Cottage, near Hill Top. Here she began to ‘reinvent herself’ as a farmer and sheep breeder while continuing to write as it soon became apparent that farming was a costly enterprise (Lear 2007: 447). It was also to become very labour-intensive, with Potter doing a great deal of the farming and repair work herself, with the help of a few tenant farmers, particularly after war was declared. As a hill farmer with sheep on the high fells, Potter believed that she, like others before and after her, were accountable to their animals, their neighbours and the culture they were aiming to protect. As James Rebanks, a local sixth generation farmer of the region (2015: 30) notes ‘... tough work knocks the silliness out of you ... you grow up in places like ours. It teaches you to get tougher or get lost’; a feeling I suspect

Potter herself experienced and much admired in others, often recalling that she was a 'descendant of hard-working north country folk' (Lear 2007:7)

Before turning to Potter's interests in the preservation of the Lake District, it is important to briefly examine the early history of the region. This is because as Denyer (2016: 17) notes, 'the Lake District is one of the last examples of agro-pastoral farming cultures in the UK', so understanding the role past practices have played in this is essential for appreciating how the landscape came to look and operate as it does today.

### **The Lake District as a physical and cultural landscape**

For many visitors to the Lake District in the north of England, it offers a picturesque vista, a unique encounter with a landscape and geography often described as so 'sublime' that it is not difficult to see why authors such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Ruskin 'made the Lake District a focus of the Romantic Movement in nineteenth century literature' (Thompson, 2007: 210). Likewise, Tolia-Kelly (2007: 330-331) suggests that the Lake District, a place of inspiration for painters such as Turner and Constable, represents an 'iconography of Englishness', a site made meaningful by its 'emotional connectivity'. As such, one can assume that for the upper-middle class Potter family, simply partaking in the reified atmosphere that had inspired the greats of their day was reason enough to keep visiting the region. For Beatrix though, it was the realism of the place that she loved, the predictable slowness of farm life routines, the hard-working country folk, the scale of the villages (compared to London) all set amidst the vast desolateness of the surrounding fells, the sheltered lakes and the fertile valleys 'which satisfied her love of the pastoral' (Lear 2007: 7).

While the physical landscape of the Lake District with its '...lakes and rocks, fells and tarns, crags and becks' remains a 'famously aestheticised landscape' (Cooper and Gregory 2011: 90), its heritage and its utilisation continue to be equally important functions of the landscape and considerations in contemporary debates about preservation, "wildness" and land-use. Even though the "naturalness" of the Lake District is often privileged in descriptions, there is no doubt that like many other rural spaces throughout England, it is subject to wider social and economic processes which infiltrate both the local lived experience and that of the national, in terms of decision making and discussions about identity, place and use. Numerous authors suggest that it is a place where embodied engagements are experienced on many different levels. Taylor (2018: 383) for example, considers it a 'soundscape', Lash and Urry (1994: 266) consider it a 'literary shrine' to writers such as Wordsworth and Potter, whilst Huggins and Gregson (2013:181) consider it a mecca for 'sport tourism'. To understand both the physical and aesthetic attachments associated with the area as well as other more nuanced motivations for preservation, Whyte (2015: 926) suggests that we need to consider '...the landscape as lived experience, produced and reproduced through the activities, knowledge practices and memories of ordinary people'. As James Rebanks, declares (2015: 3-5) 'we shaped this landscape, and we were shaped by it in turn. We are one of maybe 300 farming families who sustain this landscape and its ancient way of life'.

The way of life he refers to began around the 11<sup>th</sup> century when the Normans had taken over Cumbria, and land was divided between the king, his lords and the monasteries of the day (Lake District National Park Association, n.d (a)). It is from this period of time onwards, that tenant farmers were allowed to grow crops on the valley floor and to graze their animals on the fell or 'upland country', thus beginning the tradition of fell farming for which the region remains

famous. It was Beatrix Potter who encouraged Canon Rawnsley and the National Trust<sup>1</sup> to expand their preservation efforts to include the culture of fell farming as with 'ever more tourist businesses catering to holiday trippers, country life as well as scenic beauty were [being] threatened by division and development' (Lear 2007:318). Scott (2010:1571) confirms Potter's beliefs noting that 'as trends intensified over the twentieth century, the old farming economy of the region steadily gave way to alternate forms of enterprise answering the needs and impulses of the ever-growing number of tourists'.

With much of the early medieval buildings having already been lost, the legacy of an 'agro-pastoral' existence struggled to survive with only small 'farms and hamlets, roads and tracks, churches and mills' still remaining (Winchester 2016: 56). The commonly white-washed farmsteads were to become the core of the Lakeland farming landscapes, historically distinguishing between the landholders who grew crops in the valleys and their tenants and other locals who grazed sheep and cattle on the open fells (see Figure 3). The fells were used as a commons and later dry-stone walls or hedges were used to demarcate boundaries between private and open land (Winchester 2016). These walls simultaneously provided a 'legal and spatial construct' important in the role of 'legal order' and in formalising understandings of property which were to be later ratified by the late eighteenth and nineteenth century parliamentary enclosure movement (Blomley 2004: 93; Whyte 2015). Walton (2013: 72) suggests that these enclosures on the fells (where they took place), 'brought about a significant transformation of the upland landscape, although even after the movement had passed, the Lake District was left with uniquely extensive areas of common land, especially in the most picturesque areas'.



Figure 3 traditional white-washed houses in the Lake District [photograph by author]

It was into this complex and ever-changing rural space that Beatrix Potter entered and where she learned first-hand what a diverse and dynamic place the Lake District was especially for those whose livelihood depended on its natural resources and fickle seasons. After witnessing the failure of many small farmers in the region, she personally encouraged the National Trust to slowly acquire farms at the bottom of the valleys, 'lands at the head of watersheds and indigenous farmhouses' (Lear 2007:318), thus broadening the definition of preservation beyond simply protecting panoramic settings and manor houses. Lear (2007:140) confirms that Potter shared Rawnsley's personal view that the Lakeland environment should 'be saved for the benefit of all, and not just a wealthy few'; this included preservation of 'local crafts and craftsmen...not just romantic vistas and fine architecture'. The role she was to personally play in this is discussed further below.

### **Stewardship and Preservation**

After her marriage, Potter slowly established herself in Sawrey, where she became known as a canny businesswomen using her royalties not only to make physical improvements to her farms, but also to increase her herds of beef and dairy cattle and local Herdwick Sheep, which had special qualities that made them particularly suited to fell farming. Rawnsley was responsible for introducing Potter to the qualities of the Herdwick which he saw as 'sturdy, hearty, agile sheep' who could 'survive the harsh climate on the short herbage of the high fells', their most extraordinary quality being their 'memory to heaf' (to annually return to a certain pasture to graze) (Lear 2007: 319). Recent research has shown that Herdwicks 'have in them a primitive genome that few other British sheep carry' and as such, since their arrival (with the Vikings it is believed) 'they have been selectively bred for more than a thousand years to suit [the Lakeland] landscape' (Rebanks 2015: 56). Ensuring their continuation became almost a full-time occupation for Potter, though like all farmers, she found that this was complicated by seasonal extremes such as deep snows in winter and alternating seasons of drought or flood in the summer months which made good pasture scarce (Thomson 2007).

As secretary of the National Trust, Rawnsley was able to promote the protection of the Herdwick sheep and, as mentioned previously, the preservation of fell farming which was to play a large role in Potter's decision in 1923 to buy the 2000-acre (809 ha) Troutbeck Park farm near Windermere. As she had done at Hill Top, 'she began adding land to the perimeters of the farm as buffers against development' making sure her 'intake fields were protected' (Lear 2007: 322). As Troutbeck Park was a large farm, it was capable of supporting thousands of sheep, and its acquisition gave Potter a prestigious position among Lake District farmers (Lane, 1946). With three farms in the region, she was now a considerable property owner, and in 1924, she became one of the very few female members of the Herdwick Breeder's Association. In 1930, she was to become its first female president. This accolade was an indication of her commitment to the preservation of the Herdwick, which as Thomson (2007: 212) attests, required 'constant attention to breeding and land management, [as] without this effort, a way of life and an entire landscape would have been lost'.

This is not to suggest that Potter did not also suffer the fate of many local farmers when diseases were prevalent. Considering that 'about 95% of all Herdwicks live within 14 miles of Coniston, Cumbria, this makes the breed particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of disease<sup>2</sup> (Brandt 2018). As Lane (1946: 149), quoting Tom Storey, Potter's land manager and shepherd notes:

The farm was rotten with sheep fluke when she bought it; they used to die like flies. It were (sic) lucky the fluke-worming pill came out at the time she bought the farm. She was good like that; ask her to get anything for the sheep and she'd do it right away. That next spring we lambed a thousand sheep at the Park. ... We won prizes for Herdwicks that very first year at Hawkshead Show and she was as pleased as a dog with two tails as the saying goes! It was the first time she had won a prize. I went to nearly every show with Mrs Heelis. We were unbeaten with ewes from 1930 until 1939.

Respecting traditional local knowledge was part of the success of her breeding program as despite living in the district for many years, she still felt herself to be a newcomer. As Lear (2007: 332) notes:

What saved sheep after a big snowfall on a low-lying farm like Hill Top, where hay and ash were available, was impossible to do for a large fell flock at Troutbeck. Beatrix honoured the old custom of having some 'chop' ash and holly growing near the farmhouses and urged her tenants to do likewise. Both could be cut and given to sheep in severe winters.

In 1930, using royalties from *Little Pig Robinson*, Potter bought Monk Coniston Park estate which consisted of approximately 4000-acres (1618 ha) and included over one hundred and thirty-seven separate parcels of land which according to the National Trust was 'a property of unparalleled beauty [that] was essential to protect from development' (Lear 2007: 362). The Trust asked Potter to manage the entire estate until such time as they could take it over. It had always been her intention in purchasing this property to eventually gift it to the National Trust, but she also had more personal reasons to purchase it, because as she explained: 'my great grandfather had land there and I have always longed to buy it back and give it to the Trust in remembrance' (De Wilde 2008: 63). As both manager and agent for herself and the Trust, she had an extended opportunity to implement her own ideas on land use and preservation and thus leave an indelible imprint on the future of hill-country culture and farming.

While Potter's work with the locally iconic Herdwick sheep was well known, less well known was her engagement in protecting and restoring old buildings. Her passion for collecting old oak and other vernacular furniture was stimulated by her need to refurbish her tenants' cottages and farmhouses. With an eye for quality period pieces and a love of country craftsmanship, she drew on John Ruskin's views on the 'superiority of designs incorporating forms found in nature and of handmade objects' (Lear 2007: 375). Potter also became a long-standing supporter of the *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* founded in 1877 by William Morris 'in response to the work of Victorian architects whose enthusiasm for harmful restoration caused irreparable damage' (SPAB, 2017). She always consulted with them before beginning any restorations on her cottages to ensure they were being preserved in the correct manner.

Like her farming efforts, the cost of restoration was exorbitant, and to help defray the expenses, she turned the parlour of Yew Tree cottage at Hill Top into a tearoom for the many walkers and tourists who had begun to descend on the region. Over the years she had collected pottery and china, oak and mahogany tables, and gathered furniture by visiting local sales and rescuing Chippendale and Sheraton chairs, fine court cupboards and oak chests from destruction (Fletcher 2004: 22-23). In opening up Yew Tree, she very consciously hoped to educate the visitors about the value of old farms and farmhouses accepting that their preservation would only continue

as long as fell farming remained a success. Her efforts in this area were to be substantial and long-lasting. In fact, in her Last Will and Testament (Heelis 1939: 2), she asks that 'the rooms and furnishings... may be kept in their present condition... and that any other objects of interest belonging to me in any of my other cottages or farmhouses may be preserved within'.

In the last years of her life, Beatrix Potter continued working on her farms until she could no longer. In the winter of 1943, shortly before her death, she had her beloved Lake District landscape clearly in her mind's eye, reportedly saying:

thank God I have the seeing eye, that is to say, as I lie in bed, I can walk step by step on the fells and rough land seeing every stone and flower and patch of bog and cotton pass where my old legs will never take me again (Macdonald 1986: 186).

Until the end, she remained a champion in fighting to preserve many of the elements for which the Lake District remains famous today.

### **Her ongoing legacy**

On her death, Beatrix Potter bequeathed 4000-acres (1620ha) of land including 15 farms, numerous cottages and over 700-acres (283ha) of wooded forest areas across several Lakeland counties (Cumberland, Westmoreland and Lancashire) to the National Trust. Protecting woodlands had become particularly important to Potter as she observed, throughout her later years, that when small farms began to fail the first thing farmers would do was cut down all their trees to sell, as well as their sheep stocks, thereby diluting the local valuable breed and their natural areas of protection. Potter maintained that the 'Herdwick were and remain, ecologically and economically indispensable to the continuation of fell farming' (Lear 2007: 319). To help in the preservation of farm buildings, fell fencing and/or to assist in purchasing more land locally, Potter also left the National Trust £5000 (the equivalent today of £291,684) (Arnison Heelis, 2023). In short, her legacy ensured that not only were many facets of the Lakeland cultural landscape preserved, but, in particular, a way of farming which has had to fight to survive against the highly industrialised sector that has taken over much of England today.

While her gifts of property to the National Trust are generally well established, her recognition of local people, places and events are not. For example, in her Will (Heelis 1939: 2), she leaves her free-hold meadow at Satter Howe on the Ferry Hill to the National Trust to 'absolutely preserve the same in the memory of the Men of Sawrey who fell in the Great War 1914-1919'. Acknowledging the significant costs involved in farming, she left many of her farm cottages to local tenants and asked that any rents obtained from them only be 'moderate' (Heelis 1939: 2). And she left £100 (the equivalent of nearly £6000 today) to many of those who had worked for her over the years who were widows or farm-hands.

In terms of preserving nature and the non-human, she desired 'that the walled garden and wood' at her property 'Outgate' near Hawkshead, 'be preserved... as a bird sanctuary' and in continuing her farming legacy, she requested that 'sheep stocks on [her] fell farms...continue to be maintained of the pure Herdwick breed' and, very precisely, that 'the sheep stocks on Troutbeck farm... consist of seven hundred and fifty ewes, two hundred and fifty gimmer twinters and one hundred and seventy-five gimmer hogs' (Heelis 1939: 2-3). She saw this preservation as essential for maintaining the character of rural life in the Lake District. Supporting this belief, Squire

(1993:7) confirms that her research on Beatrix Potter showed that many participants recognised that Hill Top and other properties were still working farms, but that this 'work' seemed to have 'become part of the picturesque background against which ideas about countryside and rural life [were] constructed'.

### **The Lake District as a national park**

In 1951, the increased number of tourists Potter envisaged would come to the Lake District eventuated, and to provide a degree of protection and management control it was designated a National Park. Originally it covered an area of 885 square miles (2229 sq kms), but over many years it has been expanded to currently cover 912 square miles (2362 sq kms) or more than a third of Cumbria (Donaldson 2019). If this expansion proves anything, as Donaldson (2019: 22) suggests, it is that 'national parks aren't stable places...they're subject to change and in the Lake District's case, the change is ongoing'<sup>3</sup>. Donaldson's comment highlights the fact that national parks the world over are contested spaces where different values and visions clash over how land (in particular) is to be used.

In the UK, national park designation 'represents the highest level of landscape protection', though unlike national parks where 'wilderness and preservation are paramount' (as in Europe and the USA), in England, they can be multi-use with agro-pastoral and industrial uses, settlements and infrastructure sitting alongside ecological landscapes, making them 'best defined as scenic cultural landscapes' according to Porter (2020: 1293). As recent considerations by authors such as Whyte (2015) and Edensor (2017) suggest, embodied engagements with landscape offer different interpretations and experiences of place depending on what is understood and expected from an encounter. Thus, those who visit the Lake District today, often come with different agendas and preconceptions. For those who seek to be challenged by the landscape, climbers can scale the steep "fells" (mountains) whereas walkers, runners and horse riders can follow "foot" paths of various grades, each offering a unique vista. For those who seek to follow the "literary trail", the 'literary Pilgrims' as Herbert (2001: 312-315) calls them, the Lake District offers many authentic experiences that 'evoke memories and emotions' from childhood. As Squire's (1993, 1994) research suggests, many tourists also come to see where Beatrix Potter lived and to immerse themselves in the rural backdrops to her stories. Interviewing tourists from North America, Japan and Australia, she found specifically that people 'used Potter and a visit to Hill Top [now a museum] to construct first, an idea of countryside as [the rural idyll], and secondly, notions of Englishness' (Squire 1993: 7).

Given this, it is very clear that there exists a complex relationship between the past and the present inspired not only by the geographical setting of the landscape, but also by the everyday representation or performance of rural life. It is most important to note, however, that it is in these sorts of protected landscapes that 'a particular, often elite, vision of the countryside' can also be created, one which excludes ethnic minorities or lower socio-economic groups (Yarwood, 2023: 159). As Tolia-Kelly (2007: 331), suggests, too often the representations and hegemonic narratives that exist in places such as the Lake District simply exclude 'multiple histories and affective relationships, including those of gendered and racialized cultural narratives.' Acknowledging this, it can be concluded that while most of the attention in protected areas is focused on the spectacular landscapes and so on, it is in fact the 'landscape silences' of who or what is missing or hidden that are most telling (Winchester et al. 2013, quoted in Yarwood 2023: 160).

While it is unknown what Beatrix Potter would have made of this kind of criticism, what is known is that she was highly critical of the upper and middle classes and any indolent behaviour. She valued industrious work and was opposed to violence of any sort against individuals, even though it does feature in some of her stories in terms of realistic depictions of life (Blauvelt 2016). In her books, there are warnings, disappointments and tragedies to be overcome. Although she was aware of the gender and class issues ever-present in Victorian society, she herself was considered to be at odds with social conventions for choosing farm life over a fashionable life in London (Swamidoss, 2016: 112); her wealth, did however, give her relative independence and allowed her to break the bounds of societal expectation. This was obviously an opportunity not presented to many women of her era. Despite this, I believe that as her Will shows, Potter was generous to those less fortunate than herself, such as the widows and the farmhands, in desiring the protection of the culture of the Lake District. Unlike Wordsworth (1835:88) who was happy to share the District with 'every man...who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy', Potter believed that it should be 'be saved for the benefit of all, and not just a wealthy few' (Lear 2007:140). It is difficult to judge the percentage of migrant visitors to the Lake District during Potter's time there, particularly as post-war immigration and tourism had yet to begin. One can only assume, however, that she would have accepted their presence with far more grace than many others of her social standing. This is demonstrated most clearly when her parents first forbade her marriage to Norman Warne because he was in 'trade' and then, after his death, opposed her marriage to William Heelis because he was a 'country solicitor' who worked with 'all sorts' (Lear 2007:252). Fortunately, of Potter it is said that she was socially indifferent and cared little for fashion or society, so I feel that she would have welcomed anyone to the Lake District who would appreciate it in its ordinary, everyday, unadorned state.

### **The journey to World Heritage status**

Essentially, because of the many multi-layered cultural aspects that exist, in 2004, the Lake District National Park Association decided to begin the lengthy process of applying for UNESCO World Heritage status. This was deemed a necessary step because as Scott (2010: 1583) notes:

regions that depend for their competitive advantages on fragile and partly irreplaceable resources – like the Lake District...are inevitably faced with the problem of how best to secure effective stewardship of these resources. The problem is accentuated where the questions about appropriateness of economic change in relation to the existing fabric of development are continually in the air.

To begin this lengthy and complex process, the Lake District National Park Partnership (Partnership) was established, including representatives from twenty-five organisations and stakeholders who constituted the varied interests of tourism, forestry, environmental conservation and heritage protection (LDNPA (n.d.(b); Porter, 2020). From within this complex group of interests, the Partnership 'had to develop and commit to a strategic vision for the Lake District' which it did by March 2006 (Porter 2020: 1300). As Adams et al. (2016: 2) suggest, 'engaging with multiple owners and stakeholders from public and private sectors...demand[s] some element of co-management where the processes of governance are shared'. They note further that 'given the

requirement for a long-term commitment, relationships with local communities and especially landowners, are critical' for success (Adams et al. 2016: 4).

Attempting to achieve World Heritage status, however, was not without its difficulties. Many feared that UNESCO was being sold the view that the Lake District was still the idealised, unspoilt paradise of the literary greats, supported by its historical connections to William Wordsworth, British Romanticism, John Ruskin and Beatrix Potter. According to Lloyd et al. (2022), prior to recognition, ecologists and conservationists working in the Lake District were also privately critical of World Heritage even though they were not able to articulate those concerns in public. Indeed, those same conservationists saw World Heritage status as a major hindrance to badly needed ecological restoration.

Importantly, as Aplin (2007: 431) notes, under the designation 'Cultural Landscape' sites with 'traditional forms of land use and little change over many decades or, more often, centuries...are expected to remain largely unchanging into the future, something that may not be "natural", but rather, an artificial or bureaucratic restriction on cultural evolution and development'. Therefore, this type of heritage listing could in fact be seen as rigid and entropic, and as such, incapable of addressing the climate change events that are already affecting the district and with that, continuing to fail in the preservation of threatened biodiversity.

Despite this, achieving World Heritage status was seen locally as a way to ensure that the Lake District was recognised as 'an inspirational example of sustainable development in action' and, as such, the Lake District National Park Association (n.d.(b), and the Partnership's shared vision for the Lake District became one that saw it as a 'place where its prosperous economy, world class visitor experiences and vibrant communities come together to sustain the spectacular landscape, its wildlife and cultural heritage.' This holistic statement offered an inclusive vision for the region's future and, although it took ten years to achieve, in 2017 the English Lake District did attain World Heritage status under the category of 'Outstanding Universal Values' (UNESCO, 2020).

While many people welcomed this decision, some critics pointed to 'Criterion (v)' of the award as evidence that UNESCO had yielded to the role Beatrix Potter and her friend Hardwick Rawnsley had played in prioritising culture over ecological biodiversity. Criterion (v) noted that:

Land use in the English Lake District derives from a long history of agro-pastoralism. This landscape is an unrivalled example of a northern European upland agro-pastoral system based on the rearing of cattle and native breeds of sheep [and] ...these surviving attributes of land use form a distinctive cultural landscape which is outstanding in its harmonious beauty, quality, integrity and on-going utility and its demonstration of human interaction with the environment (UNESCO, 2020).

Irrespective of the criticism, the National Park Authority went on to create the post of "World Heritage Coordinator" to manage, monitor and maintain the stated values through a Management Plan on behalf of the Partnership (UNESCO 2020); the Plan is to be reviewed every five years. Equally important, from the initial planning stages until today, is that local farmers and other "insiders" such as James Rebanks and others have been employed by UNESCO as expert advisors on sustainable tourism. While this appears to be a sensible move, there remains a danger that narrow and pedantic approaches to management can still occur. It is hoped, however, that this representation, achieves what Rebanks (2020: 265) suggests, where a 'new deal, a new

understanding, a new system that brings farming and ecology together' will occur, and with it, 'a new dialogue, realism, trust and a changing of behaviours' to ensure that the managed future of the Lake District is a balanced one. As Jamie Lund, Deputy Chair of the English Lake District Technical Advice Group, (2018: 6-7) notes:

the Lake District Partnership remains in my view, the best and only option for governance of the English Lake District. Its existence ensures that there is a forum for the diverse assortment of partner organisations to come together, creating a sense of common purpose that can open up the limiting-thinking that frequently exists within individual organisations.

### **'Wildness' and the future of the Lake District**

Whilst Beatrix Potter embraced the wildlife she saw in the Lake District, the badgers, squirrels, hedgehogs etc., and worked hard to preserve the woodland forests on her properties as native habitat, it is not difficult to imagine what she would have thought of an idea to reclaim man-made landscapes and reintroduce wildlife such as boars, wolves, osprey and lynx. In her Will, she is quite specific that 'the hunting of otter hounds and harriers shall be forbidden and prohibited over the whole of my Troutbeck property' – some 2000-acres (809 ha) (Heelis 1939: 3). While currently there is no discussion of hunting reintroduced species under the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended 2011), there are a number of game birds, waterfowl and mammals that can be legally shot (BASC 2022).

One of the major flaws of the rewilding argument, however, is that it is 'a misnomer to imagine that such a complex reversal of nature could occur and not inflict damage to the current environment that itself has emerged over centuries', as noted by an international authority on cultural and historical aspects of landscapes (Rotherham 2014: 38). He suggests further (2014: 36) that while there are 'areas of the Peak District and the Lake District that certainly have a feeling of the 'wild' about them' they are, however, 'certainly not 'wilderness' [and] have not been so for thousands of years'.

Despite these arguments, counter claims made by popular journalists such as George Monbiot have kept the debate alive by advocating the removal of sheep from the uplands of Wales and the Lake District, terming sheep as an 'invasive ruminant, from Mesopotamia', that are 'sheepwrecking' the natural landscape (Monbiot 2013). Dismissing any Western literary or Christian pastoral ideals, Olwig (2016: 259) suggests that Monbiot's rewilding ideas 'turn sheep that have been grazing the uplands for millennia, into immigrant scapegoats' for flooding in the region, despite the fact that scientific studies of upland environments suggest that 'both flooding and the desiccation of wetlands might well also be related to large-scale engineering interventions, such as dams and drainage systems' further upstream. Irrespective of these assertions, Monbiot remains influential within popular environmental Non-Government Organisations and has been described by the Conservation Director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds as representing 'a powerful, perceptive and, at times, challenging vision for the future of our land and seas' (Harper 2013).

When World Heritage status was granted to the Lake District, somewhat predictably, George Monbiot (2017) claimed that:

everything that is wrong with conservation is exemplified by this decision: the cowardice, the grovelling, the blandishments, the falsehoods. The way conservation groups rolled over is shameful, but also familiar. They did nothing to prevent the Lake District, England's largest and most spectacular national park, from being officially designated a Beatrix-Potter-themed sheep museum. The Lake District's new designation is based on a fairytale.

These comments, for better or worse, confirm the large role that Beatrix Potter did have on the preservation of rural life in the Lake District. What they fail to recognise, however, is that conservation and preservation today are not solely about the choice of one type of protection over another. As those who have lived and worked in the Lake District over generations freely acknowledge, it is a hybrid landscape, not a perfect one, but one still capable of change. The Lake District today, is neither 'pure wilderness nor pure productivity': it relies on a host of people who understand 'enlightened land stewardship' and tap into a long-standing love and pride for the region (Rebanks 2020: 202-203). Perhaps this is not something "outsiders" can understand, but as Rebanks (2020: 273) notes further:

I see other people in our community who aren't farmers also planting trees and hedges, or creating wetlands, or helping to coordinate our efforts. These things bring separate worlds together, and the old 'us' and 'them' divide is fading. There is a love of this place that unites us all.

As such, as Rotherdam (2014:42) poignantly suggests:

Rural tourism is based on people visiting traditional landscapes. Tourists come to experience local communities *in* their landscapes, and to partake of locally distinctive hospitality, cuisine and drinks, not [to see] de-populated, abandoned dereliction. Furthermore, what may be a bleak, forbidding upland landscape, which is profoundly depressing to one person, may be ecstatically close to heaven for another.

## Conclusion

The evolution of the Lake District continues today. Its landscape is a patchwork of meaning and experience laid down by different generations over time. Having been saved from over-development by the early work of individuals such as Hardwicke Rawnsley and his long-term friend, author Beatrix Potter, the Lake District, whilst remaining ever popular with many different types of tourists, still remains fairly untouched in the everyday rhythms and routines of its residents. There is no denying, however, that like many rural spaces throughout the UK, the Lake District has inevitably become more commodified. Beatrix Potter anticipated this growth in tourism, but she also recognised that embodied knowledge of local life should come from these visits, as this was what was needed to preserve the Lakelands and their unique culture and geographic setting. As such, Beatrix Potter created a legacy which firstly, brought about a love of nature in the minds of children, and secondly, challenged others to think about stewardship and preservation at a time when it was not popular. This preservation was 'not just of a few farms or fells, but of a whole regional ecology, a distinct [and vulnerable] farming culture, and a particular

breed of nimble-footed grey sheep' (Lear 2007: 447). Likewise, her work on accurately and attentively restoring old buildings and leaving property and means to the National Trust, meant that the things she valued most about the Lake District could continue to be shared with many generations to come, and that type of legacy remains an invaluable gift to all.

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No potential conflict of interest is reported by this author.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Beatrix Potter's relationship with the National Trust began when she was very young through her friendship with Hardwicke Rawnsley (one of its founders) which began when she was 17 years of age in 1883. Rawnsley had been a student of John Ruskin's and wanted to further Ruskin's efforts to preserve the unspoiled landscape and culture of the Lake District. He founded the National Trust in 1895. Rupert Potter (Beatrix's father) was very impressed by Rawnsley's passion and they shared common intellectual and aesthetic interests. Rawnsley noticed Beatrix's drawings and engaged her in conversations about conservation and natural history, sharing his extensive knowledge of the Lake District's geology and archaeology. It was to be the start of a long friendship. Realising her own growing love for the region, each time an issue of preservation would arise, Rawnsley would turn to Potter for help, asking her, where she could, to utilise her fame both in England and in America (where she also had a large following) to publicise issues. Over time, her own role and work with the National Trust was to become more significant in her recognising what needed protecting locally and how this might also be achieved financially.

<sup>2</sup> In 2001, an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, led to the destruction of many flocks, and to fears for the survival both of the breed and of the typical Lakeland sheep farming industry. Of the estimated 100,000 Herdwick sheep present before the outbreak, a full 25% were lost. The destruction of entire flocks - some with bloodlines centuries old - meant that the shepherds were forced to undergo the process of again *beafing* their new sheep to the hills (Brandt 2018).

<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 2019, the charity *Friends of the Lake District* submitted a proposal to extend the national park by a further 6 per cent (Donaldson 2019: 2). No ruling has been made on this yet.

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