

A Tale of Beatrix Potter's War

Gareth Evans followed a lead that he found in the most recent biography of Beatrix Potter and has made some unforeseen herbal connections.

Childhood readers of Beatrix Potter's illustrated stories of only-too-human animals played out in rural settings will remember how they can be infused with the presence of herbs. The herb-filled garden remains at her Hill Top Farm at Sawrey, Ambleside. Inside the farmhouse her own 1597 copy of Gerard's *Herball* is displayed as requested by her, from which a distinctive passage appears in her *The Fairy Caravan* (1929). On the 150th anniversary of her birth we know and understand more than ever of her remarkable character and life.

Despite parental disapproval of her marriage, by the beginning of WWI the 38 year-old Beatrix Potter (BP) had created a fulfilling life for herself in the Lake District as a conscientious farmer and landowner. Her youth had been spent in a privileged South Kensington household where she was taught at home. By her late twenties her activities had spread into many branches of science. As her gender prevented her from doing so, her carefully prepared paper on fungi propagation was read for her to the Linnean Society in 1897. Starting with *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* in 1902, her successful children's books gave her the financial independence that was to take her from town to her much-loved countryside whose way of life she fully embraced.



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A young Beatrix Potter.

The Home Front

In spring/summer of 1916, wartime shortages brought both herbs and war work to the practical side of BP's rural life. Her first wartime farm helper, 'Louie' Choyce, wrote that they had been walking between various locations in the Lakeland landscape 'gathering broom tips, sphagnum moss, & planting heaps of lavender we

The cover of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

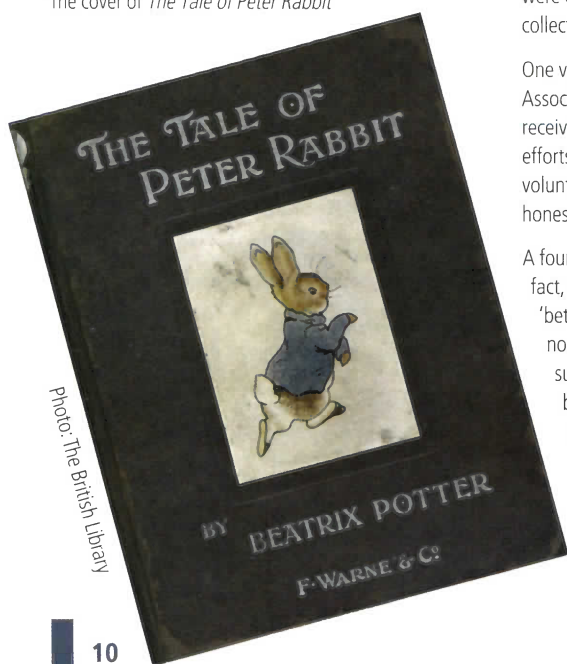


Photo: The British Library

have to walk a mile or two to get the Broom & then we get Foxglove leaves and Barberry' (25th May).

These well-established medicinal plants (see box) were among those collected to make up for the depletion of pre-war sources in Germany and Central Europe. Compared to WWII there was for the most part little direct government co-ordination during WWI, a situation described in Peter Ayres's recent book. People were encouraged to use their own enterprise to grow or collect plant material to be offered on the open market.

One voluntary initiative was the National Herb Growing Association (later Growers' Association). With its receiving office in London, it planned to co-ordinate the efforts of individual growers/collectors and many voluntary local groups that had sprung up, acting as an honest broker between the small producers and buyers.

A founder member was Edith Grey Wheelwright (in fact, she may have been the motive force if we read 'between the lines' of her account). A notable novelist in the late 19th century and an organising suffragette in Bath from 1902, in the 1930s she began to write books on gardening and the history of medicinal plants. Both Edith Wheelwright's name and the Association are heavily linked to the influential Maud Grieve and her enterprise, The Whins Medicinal and Commercial Herb School at Chalfont St Peter. The herbal monographs that Maud Grieve

produced at this time were to be compiled and edited into the classic *A Modern Herbal* (1931) by Hilda Leyel, the founder of the organisation that was to become today's Herb Society.

In late summer 1916 Edith Wheelwright's name appears in a letter from BP to her sister-in-law, and frequent correspondent, Grace Nicholson. Edith Wheelwright had stayed at Sawrey to help and advise on medicinal plant collection. Also a farmer, Grace Nicholson had wanted to know more about aconite, or blue monkshood (a potent but notoriously variable species). BP writes,

"Miss Wheelwright left this morning, I asked her about your aconite root she says the great trouble is that the druggists want a particular sort and they can only identify it by the flower, which I suppose is over? I think she said the right one flowers early. My double camomile is [the] wrong sort too. We have sent our 20lbs dried foxglove leaves back to town with her." (7 September 1916).

Both were literary women, and in time Edith Wheelwright was to warmly recollect her visit in the dedication to a later book: 'To "Beatrix Potter", in memory of summer when I found Grass of Parnassus [the bog star, *Parnassia palustris*] on the mountain side, and we dried the foxglove leaves in her barn'. The drug producers required 'good, clean herb', a phrase that

meant it was promptly and carefully dried to preserve its active constituents.

As Edith Wheelwright returns to London with the dried leaves, BP must have been an Association member, signed up to its co-operative system. At an informed estimate, as much as 36.3kg of fresh foxglove leaves must have been collected for this batch.

The Association's adviser E M Holmes (Curator and Lecturer to the Pharmaceutical Society, and a leading naturalist) had made clear that the market for medicinal plants included not only the drug houses but the many practising herbalists and homeopaths. 'Weeds' that were needed by 'the hundredweight or ton' included: agrimony leaves, burdock root, cleavers, sweet woodruff, coltsfoot, ground ivy, black bryony, couch grass, comfrey, sweet flag, and valerian. The Association provided a monthly list of herbs currently in demand.

Another patriotic organisation encouraged the collection of medicinal plants by schoolchildren, scouts and guides. Edith Wheelwright describes what frequently went wrong. "Schoolchildren returned from the foxglove woods bearing in their hot little hands things quite other than foxglove, and the collections took hours to sort". In their frequent exchange of letters Grace Nicholson must have mentioned a similar sort of mix-up as BP replied to her,

"How funny about the mullein! Both that herb and comfrey are bought by the herbalists, who are somewhat mysterious people. I am rather surprised at the substitution of m. [mullein] for foxglove leaves, because it is the less common plant, & was more tiresome to dry. I have used 'flannel leaf' myself for toothache and had imagined it might be for making embrocation." (11 October 1916).

Considering her immersion in rural life it is perhaps predictable that she explored folk remedies. Using a good country name for the woolly leaves of mullein (commonly confused with those of foxglove) she had experienced the soothing qualities of its demulcent and anti-inflammatory constituents that extend throughout the whole plant. Maud Grieve refers to a decoction (an extract in water) of mullein roots being held to be 'an alleviation for toothache'. BP goes on to suggest a sensible concomitant use as an emollient.

She was an assiduous correspondent, keeping in touch with both Miss Choyce, until her death, and Miss Wheelwright (inscribed gifts from BP exist from 1918 and 1928). These quoted letters are at the same time ordinary – in the account of the everyday trials of wartime herb collection – and extraordinary as not every collector was BP. Discoveries in the many more apparently mundane unpublished letters from BP to

friends and family may tell us more in time.

BP's love and knowledge of the Lake District and its rural culture began with her free wanderings during her youthful family holidays. It was to culminate with her donation of a total of 1,618ha of land to the National Trust by her death in 1943. Exactly how intimately she knew this diverse landscape is confirmed by her extensive, public-spirited botanical excursions of summer 1916.

References

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The author wishes to thank the following for their kind assistance: Victoria & Albert Museum Archives, The Beatrix Potter Society, The Herb Society, Dr Linda Lear and Rose Oliveira of The Lear Center, Connecticut College.



Photo: Gareth Evans

Sphagnum moss (*Sphagnum palustre*): the most concerted collected of wartime medicinal plants; dried it is twice as absorbent as cotton wool, which it replaced. Aconite (*Aconitum napellus*), *Aconiti Radix*: root (pictured) made a powerful tincture used to prepare a 'freely prescribed' pain-relieving liniment or rub; typically found in shady moist locations, 'ruthlessly grubbed up for the market's demands' in wartime Europe. Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), *Digitalis Folia*: individual glycosides, such as the modern cardiac drug digoxin, had yet to be standardised; mixtures of digitalis glycosides extracted from the leaves were used pharmaceutically; frequent in damp woods. Barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*), *Berberidis Cortex*: preparations from the bark used against dysentery and jaundice; salts were available of extracted anti-bacterial alkaloid berberine; traditionally destroyed near agricultural land, 'single bushes may be found in woods'. Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*), *Scoparii Cacumina*: preparations from the dried tops of flowering branches; a weak diuretic for cardiac conditions; heath & wasteland.

Peter Rabbit's Chamomile Tea. The inscription is from Beatrix Potter to Edith Wheelwright.

On loan to the Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College.