

Rag and Bone

Beatrix Potter was aged thirty-nine when she became engaged to her editor, Norman Warne, in July 1905. Four weeks later he died of leukaemia. Potter fled with her grief to Hill Top, a farm she had recently acquired at Near Sawrey in the Lake District, and for the next thirty years she would build up that property, transform herself into a prize-winning breeder of Herdwick sheep, and complete the series of twenty-two children's books which would be her literary legacy. Looking back at her life, that literary endeavour almost seems incidental: she began the series with *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, which she issued privately in 1901, and she had concluded nineteen of the books by 1913; by 1920 her poor eyesight discouraged her from producing any more.ⁱ

Potter descended from hard-working north-country folk, and her return to the north from London, prompted by holidays she had spent there as a child, felt like a homecoming. She found the landscape to be a wilderness which spurred her to fantasise, and later it would suggest very specific settings for her books. *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-winkle*, which she began in 1901, was set in the Newlands Valley, an area just west of Derwentwater, and it told the tale of the little girl Lucie who goes searching for her pocket handkerchiefs and her "pinnie" and finds them in the cottage of the hedgehog washer-woman Mrs Tiggy-winkle. Nearly a decade later, Potter would begin *The Tale of Mr Tod*. It was to be very different from her earlier tales ("I am quite tired of making goody goody books about nice people," she wrote in the original manuscript. "I will make a story about disagreeable people.") Nevertheless, it was once again set close by in the landscape around Sawrey, and she chose names for its characters which were rooted in the earth. Mr Brock's name came from an old country word for a badger, and "Tod" Potter believed to be a Saxon word which had been in use in Scotland to describe foxes until the late nineteenth century.

This autumn, Laura Ford's own bronze versions of Brock, Tod and Tiggy-winkle, are installed along the seafront in Margate; later on, towards Christmas, they will come to the Economist Plaza in London's St James. They are recognisable as Potter's creations, but they have been drastically modernised: Mrs Tiggy-winkle is hunched over and buried in coats and old shawls, while she pushes a pram laden with her accumulated belongings; Mr Brock, enveloped in an old sleeping bag, seems to have

risen from slumber only to pad along the street and rifle through bins; and Mr Tod, similarly wrapped in old bedspreads, slumps on the pavement and stares out wondering where it all went wrong. Even the Flopsy Bunnies that Brock and Tod heartlessly consumed in Potter's story have fallen: they've fled the burrow and resorted to solvent abuse. Ford's Bunnies are installed in Droit House in Margate, and her finely finished sketches of Brock, Tod and Tiggy-winkle, softly described like anecdotal motifs in a topographical sketch, adorn the walls. But the bronzes are left out in the cold, no doubt to be regularly mistaken for real rough sleepers. Indeed, some people will see Ford's new sculptures without ever really seeing them at all: only if they pay them the courtesy that the world rarely pays to the poor, and look them in the face, will they realise that they are not actually rough sleepers.

So, what are we to make of Beatrix Potter's creations – those figures so deeply sunk in country locality - being recreated as homeless wanderers in Ford's new work? There's a little comic irony, obviously, in the unthroning and disenchanting of these childhood heroes. There's a comment on the degradation of the public space which once supported so much figurative public sculpture. And there is also a sadness that is older than our contemporary cynicism: E M Forster, a contemporary of Potter, returned again and again in *Howards End* (1910) to his thoughts on the miserable modernity of the London he knew, and he voiced a romantic lament for how the city had lured so many sorry souls who, he believed, were once much happier gathering in the harvest. Laura Ford's figures reframe that lament for a new time.

But there is another dimension in which Ford responds to the fall from grace of Beatrix Potter's creations. Ford's work has often approached the theme of socialisation through child-figures who appear to be being groomed for very particular gender roles. The *Chintz Girls*, that she created in 1998, are so overcome in decoration, in floral formality, that it spreads over their faces, voiding them of personality. The *Elephant Boys* (1999) and the *Armour Boys* (2006) explore aspects of the engendering of men, putting forth images of boys hopelessly striving to attain an ideal of armed and potent manhood. Although Ford's new work marks a departure in terms of its use of literary sources, the most significant and intriguing difference in this new series is what it has to say about the passage from innocence to adult experience. The trials of this passage are one of her established themes, and she has frequently returned to it as a means through which to show how society imposes its

forms on innocent childhood and beats it into problematic shapes. This time the balance of innocence and experience seems to be reversed.

One of Ford's inspirations for this series - aside from Potter's tales themselves - was the series of figurines that Royal Doulton later produced, based on Potter's characters. They are charming, in their way, and over time they have almost come to be regarded as classics in their own right. But they are, nevertheless, a version of kitsch. That is not simply to say that they are cheaply ingratiating, vulgar or sugary - that is a matter of taste - but it is to say that the figurines cleanse Potter's characters of any of the dirt that might still have been clinging to them when she carried them from the landscape and installed them in her tales. Potter's stories are not studies in realism, that's true, but neither do they look on the country with the dewy eyes of a city dweller - no farm owner could do that. Her characters are based on observation as much as invention. The transformation that Royal Doulton effected, however, was to cleanse the characters of all that might be unwholesome or indecent about them, by removing them from their landscape and making them ready for the mantelpiece.

So how might modern sculptures of Potter's creations resist that process of isolation and purification? One route is suggested by the caganer, a traditional Catalan figurine which depicts people squatting to relieve themselves. Writing in *The Guardian* some years ago, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, Giles Fraser, a Church of England minister, drew attention to a minor controversy which had recently emerged in the United States about an exhibition of caganers.ⁱⁱ They are traditionally hidden in among the more conventional inhabitants of Christmas nativity scenes, and although their intention is slightly comic, it is not sacrilegious: their larger purpose is to remind us that when God became man, the sacred was no longer protected from the profane. Kitsch, Giles Fraser goes on to remind us, reverses this process: in the universe of kitsch, there must be perfection, there must not be dirt. To object to the caganer is, therefore, to object to the heart of the story which gave Christmas its power.

Laura Ford's characters carry out a similar operation to the caganer. They do so, very aptly, in the months leading up to Christmas; and they do so in such a way that they reflect back at us the peculiar and unsettling economy of sentiment, of generosity and guilt, and of giving and receiving, that emerges at this time of year. We give to our own in order to celebrate generosity, and yet, undeniably, guilt also prompts us to give to those who cannot give themselves. Then, when all the giving is done, we close our minds once more to all the imploring, we shut out the cold world and sugar the

season with the stuff of fairy tales. In this context, Ford's characters effect a brilliant confusion. They implore us to give, they outrage us with their suggestion of innocence destroyed, and they leave us nervously doubting that things are not right. Like Mr Tod, slumped and staring glassy eyed before him, they leave us wondering what went wrong. And if there are still figures – of man, beast or fairy tale invention - lurking in the shadows while we go about spending this Christmas, they are surely correct to do so.

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ⁱ Details of Beatrix Potter's life are taken from Linda Lear: *Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature*, London 2006

ⁱⁱ Giles Fraser, "Happy Kitschmas", *The Guardian*, 16th December 2002