Beatrix Potter (1866–1943) in Japan

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Beatrix Potter in front of her house in the Lake District

In 1893 Beatrix Potter (1866–1943) wrote a letter to five-year-old Noel Moore, the son of her former governess Annie Carter. Noel was sick and spending the summer holidays in bed instead of playing outside with his siblings. Potter did not know what to say to cheer the boy up, so she told him a story about a naughty rabbit called Peter, illustrating the story with pen and ink drawings. Peter ends the story in bed, being spoon-fed camomile tea, while in the next room his siblings feast on bread and milk and blackberries. Whether Noel got sick by eating too much lettuce has never been recorded. This picture letter was the first telling of what later came to be published by Frederick Warne and Company in 1902 as The Tale of Peter Rabbit. Since its publication, it has sold more than 250 million copies worldwide and has been translated into thirty-five languages. One of the earliest scholars of Potter’s life and work Leslie Linder (1904–73) wrote in his A History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter that the earliest known translation of Potter’s work into a foreign language was a Dutch version’ in 1912, but recent research suggests
that the very first foreign language edition of the tale was in fact Japanese.²

In 1906 a Japanese language version of The Tale of Peter Rabbit appeared in Issue Three, Volume Two of Nihon Nōgyō Zashī (The Magazine of Japanese Agriculture), a magazine published by the Nisshūsha newspaper, the forerunner of The Yomiuri Shim bun. The magazine began in 1905 and continued until 1922. Its aims were to promote Japanese agriculture, and to introduce the latest developments in the field from abroad. The piece appeared in a regular section of the magazine devoted to pastoral literature; works by writers such as Byron (1788–1824) and Turgenev (1818–83) appeared alongside those of homegrown writers such as Tayama Katai (1872–1930). Other agricultural magazines of the period tended to focus on and value pastoral literature in the same way: for example, James Joyce had his first short story, The Sisters, published in the agricultural magazine Irish Homestead in 1904.

Potter’s story was translated (rather free and easily) by Matsukawa Jirō, a travel writer and journalist, and published as Otogi Shōsetsu: Itazura na Kousagi (A Fairy Tale of a Mischiefous Little Rabbit). Beatrix Potter was not named as the author of the tale and her naughty rabbit was no longer called Peter but ‘Peta’. Oddly, his sisters kept their original names. Mr McGregor became distinctly less Scottish, becoming ‘Mokubei Jiisan’ (Old Mokubei). The story was illustrated with four black and white pictures, which were clearly modelled on Potter’s originals. The question of copyright infringement was not such a hot potato in those days, but even so, it would appear that Mr Matsukawa was wary of getting caught (and put in a pickle if not a pie). In his later ‘translation’ of The Tale of Benjamin Bunny which appeared in the next issue of the same magazine, he did not include any illustrations and made his version of the story a much freer translation altogether. His adaptation of the story appeared under the title Itazura na Kousagi: Gojitsu-san (A Fairy Tale of a Mischiefous Little Rabbit: The Sequel). As far as we know, he did not try his hand at any more of Potter’s tales. It is not known how he came across the original story in the first instance.

Between 1906 and 1971 thirteen different versions of The Tale of Peter Rabbit appeared in Japan: five as picture books, six in magazines or in collections of stories, and two as kamishibai (large picture boards used in storytelling). Frederick Warne officially sanctioned none of these thirteen versions.

In 1918 a translation of The Tale of Peter Rabbit was published in two parts, in Nos 7 and 8 of Volume 5 of the children’s magazine Kodomo no Tomo (The Children’s Friend). The tale in the Japanese version stays very close to the Potter original, but the pictures are simply traced from her originals and coloured rather garishly. No names