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A tiny old woman, wearing a long woollen coat and a dark straw hat decorated with bright silk flowers, paces in front of the hippopotamus pool in The Edinburgh Zoo on Corstorphine Hill. She is surrounded by children who gather near her and, at a greater distance, by curious but wary Scots. She has large, prominent, sapphire-blue eyes, and a sharp nose that sniffs the air as her fingers clutch at it for emphasis as she speaks. Her several necklaces and many bracelets make clinking sounds as she finds the right spot near the pool. When a sufficient crowd has gathered, she addresses Maggie, her hippopotamus friend, in Hindustani, the hippo's native tongue. She has compiled a private glossary of Hindustani words, which she consults when conversing with the hippos. Maggie responds to her high-pitched commands as she raises her head from the murky water, her tiny ears alert and twitching.¹ When she moves purposefully on to the elephant enclosure, the children clamber after her. Once she locates her favourite baby elephant, she pulls herself up to her full height—barely five feet—and stands confidently before him. In piercing, pedantic tones, she orders the little elephant to bow low in a salaam. When he drops to his knees, the children cheer. She bends down to the children and, in a confidential soft voice, says that it is beyond her powers to get the elephant to say 'please'. The children squirm and giggle with pleasure at this private confession. The adults keep far enough away to show their disdain for an eccentric character but stay close enough to observe if the elephant will follow orders.²

¹ Margaret Macdonald, 'Memories of Trix Kipling', in *Trix: Kipling's Forgotten Sister*, ed. by Lorna Lee (Kent: Pond View Press, 2003), p. 112.

² Colin MacInnes, England, Half English (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1961), p. 114.

2 Trix

This is Trix Kipling, the younger sister of Rudyard, in old age, performing winningly on her last stage. In many biographies of Rudyard Kipling, Trix makes her final appearance at the Edinburgh Zoo, and she is portrayed not as a cunning old charmer and an accomplished performer but as a lone madwoman, gesturing and jabbering in Hindustani to the uncomprehending elephants. This image of Trix as flighty and fey at best, incompetent and insane at worst, has persisted unchallenged for decades.

While Kipling's biographers properly identify Trix as Rudyard's sole companion during his miserable childhood and as one side of the 'Family Square'—the pet name for the four Kiplings happily reunited in Lahore—they lose sight of her when she turns twenty-one. They delight in Trix's beauty and wit, which captivated the Viceroy's son, and they ignore her once she marries a dour Scot ten years her senior. She surfaces in Rudyard's life now and again as an inconvenience or an embarrassment.

When I tried to discover how this unfortunate view became established, I recognized that by the time Trix married at twenty-one, Rudyard was already famous and traveling the world, never to return to India, while Trix remained on the sub-continent. The two were rarely in the same country or even on the same continent, although they were both in England during the onset of Trix's two periods of mental collapse (in 1898 and 1911). Thus, Trix was especially present in Rudyard's life and thoughts during her periods of extreme mental and marital distress. Disliking Trix's husband, Jack Fleming, and disapproving of Trix's participation in psychic research experiments, Rudyard distanced himself from both. He (correctly) held Jack largely responsible for Trix's first breakdown, and (incorrectly) blamed the Society for Psychic Research for Trix's later mental troubles. Trix's years of contentment and creativity seem to have passed Rudyard, and his biographers, by.

Trix may also have been overlooked because her poetic talent, which blossomed early (in her teens), also faded early (in her thirties), never developing into mature art. While her beauty, her wit, and her 'reverent irreverence'³, lasted a lifetime, they were appreciated only by a small local audience. Her story is one of resilience and reinvention, not one

³ Lance Thirkell to Sheila Wilson, 30 January 1988. Private collection of Lorna Lee.

(like her brother's) of precocious gifts resulting in fame and fortune. Trix fought to turn her many talents into personal satisfaction or worldly success, and she was hampered not only by the expectations of her family and the restrictions of her time, but by her own inhibitions. It goes without saying that stories of struggle, compromise, and defeat are less satisfying to tell or hear than stories of struggle, perseverance, and triumph.

Thus, most of Trix's fascinating life is unknown. In telling Trix's story, my primary intention is to rescue her from the misrepresentations, trivializations, and outright neglect of Rudyard's many biographers.

Here, for the first time, is the story of Trix's life, beginning with the terrible childhood she shared with Rudyard as a Raj orphan living with cruel strangers in the south of England. I follow her through her calm adolescence and describe the six happy years she spent back in India, being spoiled by her parents and being encouraged by her brother to write parodies, poetry, and stories, which were regularly mistaken for his. I trace her marriage to a stiff British officer stationed in India under the Raj from its hopeful beginnings through its childless, cheerless middle to its ultimate uneasy accommodation.

I correctly locate and attribute all of Trix's short fiction, poetry, and journalism, giving special attention to her two ambitious but flawed novels. I explore Trix's participation as a writer of automatic scripts for the Society for Psychical Research, describing the society's rigorous methods, serious purposes, and extremely modest claims and placing its activity in the context of nineteenth-century scientific thought. Finally, I discuss the causes for Trix's two periods of mental illness and the efficacy of the treatment routinely prescribed for her and for most female mental patients at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

Most importantly, I give a voice, a mind, and a heart to a misunderstood, misrepresented, but indomitable woman.

At about the same time that Trix, aged seventy, was charming children at the Edinburgh Zoo, she wrote to old family friend Edith Plowden describing the circumstances of her birth. The harrowing description serves as an explanation for how Trix became an exceptional performer and an unforgettable presence. In order to survive, she made herself first into a clever little show-off and later into a fascinating fabulist.

4 Trix

Here is how Trix began the story of her birth:

I was born June 11th 1868—Mother was sent home by doctors—that she might not run the risk of a second long agony—such as she had when Ruddy was born—As it was she nearly died poor darling—& I was still born—with a black eye & broken left arm—Aunt Georgie picked me up from the hearthrug where they had put me—practically dead—as I hadn't breathed.⁴

The central character here is Alice, the mother who 'nearly died'. The damaged newborn, also 'practically dead', is reported almost as an afterthought. Casually, it seems, Aunt Georgie retrieved the baby from the cold floor. She patted the baby's back with her tiny hands until the busy doctor found 'a minute to spare' from attending to Alice to give the baby a good pounding. This revived the lifeless infant. Although the baby survived, its dangers were not over. Georgie carried the infant into her husband's painting studio and laid it carelessly on an armchair. A stout art dealer, visiting on business, came into the studio and prepared to seat himself on the silent, swaddled bundle. 5 Georgie, busy welcoming the important guest, rushed over, snatched the child in her arms, and carried it away from the danger. The baby, 'a poor scrap of humanity', is almost thrown away, forgotten, and left to die discarded on the floor. She is saved, almost on a whim, by her aunt—who rescued her because, according to Trix, 'I looked so like a Blake baby—as I sprawled on the floor-big & white'.6 The doctor noticed after delivering the baby that its arm was broken, but he didn't bother to set it until several days after the birth, when the child had shown it 'meant to survive'.

Survival, she was being taught at birth, was her own responsibility. She had better learn this lesson quickly and well.

That Alice Kipling insisted on giving birth back in England and not in India, where she had been living, and that a daughter was born to her on this date in the home of her sister Georgiana Burne-Jones, is known. But the pathetic descriptions of a bruised and broken child left to die on the floor, then almost crushed by a fat visitor, and finally neglected by the doctor, are featured only in Trix's version of the story. In this telling,

⁴ Trix Kipling, letter to Edith Plowden, 7 October 1936. University of Sussex.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Trix imagined her infant self as injured, unseen, and unloved, and thus liable to be ignored. She depicted the adult world as powerful, selfish, and careless, liable to discard or destroy a helpless, damaged child. Thus, a child had better make itself seen and heard—and fast. The story serves as an explanation for Trix's character and her most memorable qualities. Trix was a performer, a girl and a woman whose dramatic presence and extravagant speech were always noticed.

Alice returned to India when her new baby was several months old. Her husband, John Lockwood Kipling, had stayed behind when Alice returned to England for the birth of her child and only met his daughter when she had already developed her own infant personality. When the baby was placed in his lap for the first time, she displayed her playful nature. She 'insisted on playing Bo Peep & tried to pull his beard out'. He responded to her antics by calling her 'a tricksy baby'. Although she was named Alice Macdonald Kipling after her mother, she was, after that, never called anything but Trix or Trixie. The name stuck, presumably because all members of the family agreed that it fit the high-spirited infant. Trix always gave credit to her father for the invention of her name.



Fig. 1 Trix as a young child in 1872.

6 Trix

If Trix had not absorbed the lesson of self-preservation at birth, she was given a second chance when she was three years old. As a toddler living in India with her parents, she was suddenly sent, along with her brother, to live with strangers thousands of miles away from home, without explanation or preparation. Bewildered by her banishment and fearful of more neglect, she worked to make herself seen and heard. Fortunately, she was very pretty to look at and astounding to listen to. She had an especially keen memory for written and spoken impressions, and she practiced improving these natural gifts. After hearing a poem or song one time, she could recall and recite it perfectly. She soon became an eager show-off and an accomplished performer. Before she became a writer, she was an actress, a singer, and a prodigious reciter of verse.

When Trix was not performing for an audience, she invented stories to amuse and console herself. Alone much of the time, she rehearsed her favourite plots, featuring the rescue of innocent children in peril and the dreadful punishment of neglectful or cruel guardians. With her sole companion, her brother Rudyard, she created imaginary worlds which only they could enter and invented imaginary languages which only they could understand.

As Trix matured, she easily spun stories, wrote verse, and composed clever parodies. In her twenties and early thirties, she published her many stories and two novels; she created characters and plots focusing on what she knew, imagined, and feared—imposture, miscommunication, misunderstanding, detachment, betrayal, and abandonment. She created women who suffered from the loss or lack of children, who struggled with their own baffling anger and malice, and who were often the architects of their own unhappiness. She composed these unusual fictions mindful of the strictures of her society and careful of her personal modesty. Still later, she wrote automatic scripts for psychic research experiments, in which she expressed her feelings of longing and distance, disguised (even from herself) as messages between the dead and the living.

As a slender and winsome woman, Trix combined her story-telling gift with a theatrical delivery, making her an exceptional presence. She was recognized by everyone who met her as an enthusiastic and expansive talker. She peppered her conversation with quotation, long memorized passages of verse—especially Shakespeare—and enthralling stories, historical, personal, and imaginary. Among true believers and credulous

admirers, she was known for her ability to flashback in time, to call forth ghosts, and to see visions in a crystal. One of Trix's friends concluded, 'She was easily the most remarkable woman I ever expect to meet, and to listen to her stories, was well-nigh to expire of assorted excitements and interest'. This is the impression she put effort and energy into making. She liked to have an audience and knew how to play to a crowd. She demanded and commanded attention. She did not want to be neglected or forgotten, and, by those who met her, she rarely was.

⁸ Rachel Ferguson, Royal Borough of Kensington (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), p. 32.