

Kathleen Hale, *Orlando* (*The Marmalade Cat*) buys a farm, 1972

Special Collections featured item for January 2007 by Pat Hanby, Acquisitions Manager, with technical assistance by Fiona Barnard, Rare Books Librarian

Hale, Kathleen (1898-2000). *Orlando (The Marmalade Cat) buys a farm*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972

Item held in the Children's Collection, University of Reading Library Special Collections

Kathleen Hale is best known for her series of books about Orlando, the Marmalade Cat, his wife Grace and their three kittens, Tinkle, Pansy and Blanche, though she was a very talented artist in other fields. After gaining a scholarship, she was a student in the Department of Fine Art at Reading University College, (as it was then) for two years from 1915-17 where she studied under Professor Allen Seaby.



Professor Allen Seaby presiding over a Fine Art class in one of the new buildings at London Road opened in 1906.

She describes him in her autobiography as “a wry old man, brittle with rheumatism, but as cheerful and alert as a bird”. He taught her how to make woodcuts, at which she worked very hard late into the evening, being turned out of the studio by the caretaker when locking up.



She lived in St Andrew's Hall [above], and as well as her art classes spent much time at the University farm, escaping through a ground floor window at about 6 am to cycle to Lane End Farm [below], at Shinfield about 2 miles away, getting back in time for prayers. She also spent Saturday afternoons spudding thistles at sixpence an hour, to supplement her scholarship. She had always had a keen interest in animals, as is very evident in the Orlando books, particularly in the story, *Orlando buys a farm*.



Orlando was based on a family pet, a ginger cat [shown below, with Kathleen Hale] much beloved of Kathleen's elder son, Peregrine. The cat was named after a little ginger-haired Italian boy whom they encountered in Tuscany. Many incidents in the books were taken from family experiences, and the character of Orlando himself was based on her husband, Douglas

MacClean. Tinkle, the black kitten, took on many of the character traits of his inventor when young, and Grace is how she would have liked to be herself.



There were not very many good books for children when her sons were small, so she often invented her own stories for them. She was encouraged to write these down, and knowing that children enjoyed large books which they could spread open on the floor, she designed her first two Orlando books, which – after a few rejections – were published by Country Life. The work of lithographing the illustrations was so time-consuming that after the first book she learnt the process herself and did this at home to save on costs.

She took great pleasure in creating books which appealed on several levels. There is far more in her illustrations than appears at first glance, often including details which are not mentioned in the text, and there are verbal jokes that would not be obvious at once to a small child, but would be appreciated by the adult reader.



Orlando buys a farm has many such examples. It is the story of an impulse buy as a birthday present for the kittens – on a birthday picnic they come across a farm for sale, and Orlando’s urgent telegram to Master produces the requisite finance for the purchase. The family move in, though they first have to entice out the animals who have moved in and taken over. Right from the beginning, we find plenty of verbal jokes. Tinkle sees a pair of antlers on the wall and is puzzled. He wonders if these are the horns of a “Dilemma” that grown-ups talk about so much.

Orlando, discussing how to persuade the sheepdog to move from the farmer’s wife’s bed, says that the language a dog understands best is “doggerel” – whereupon Tinkle produces a couple of verses which have the immediate result of sending the dog off to find the sheep. Later, when Tinkle is

“helping” his mother to make butter in the dairy, on being scolded for eating the butter he says he was only licking it into shape.

To add interest, some of the pictures are drawn from unusual angles, such as the one where Grace is spring-cleaning the pigsty, which is shown from above, as is the picture of the cows in their stalls [below].



There are many delightful pictures of the cats doing everyday farming jobs, such as the double page spread on pages 8-9 [below], where we see Orlando and Grace side by side on a stool, milking a cow, Blanche feeding the hens, and Pansy grooming a horse. Tinkle is the exception – he is on the cowshed roof, apparently stalking the weathercock.



The pictures frequently elaborate a brief text – the picture of sheep shearing on page 14 [below] is very detailed, but the text is short. We are told that the kittens played with the clipped wool, but not what they did. Looking at the picture, we see that Tinkle has given himself a white wool beard, and clutching a stick, is pretending to be a bent old man. Pansy and Blanche are being smart ladies swathed in wool coats.

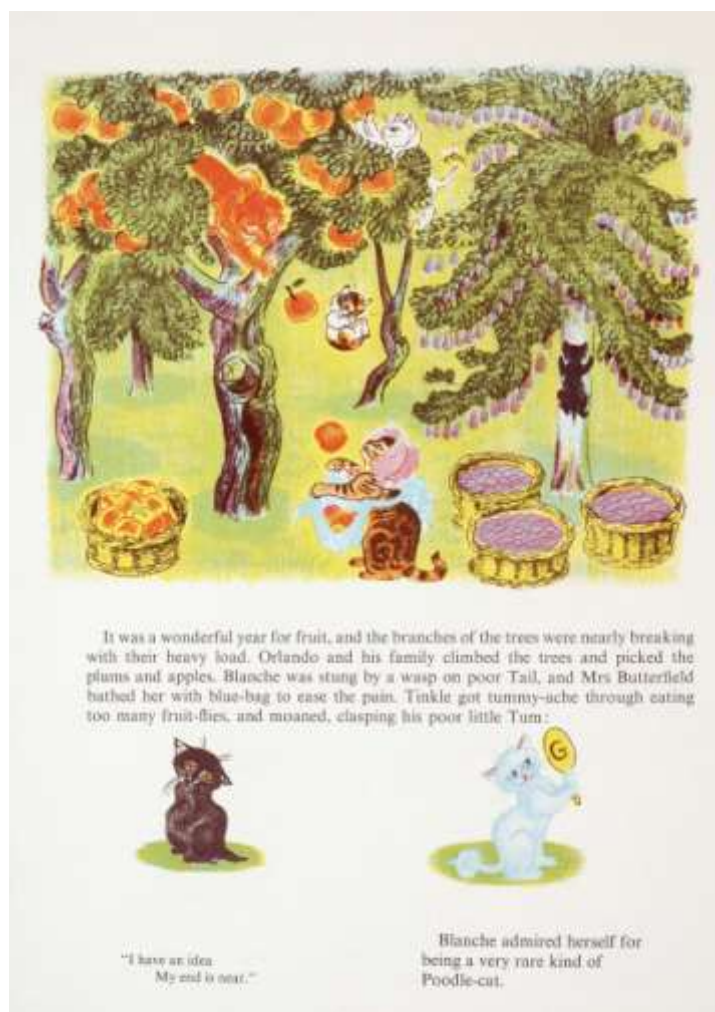


A midnight trip to market shows Orlando helping several animals who prove useful to him in return. The rear light on the cart fails, and on being ordered by a policeman to rectify the situation, Orlando improvises by using glow-worms which had got in among the vegetables by mistake, with the promise that he will get them home safely afterwards. A snake who is frightened that he will fall down a drain in town comes in useful to replace the broken string on a bunch of carrots. “Done” said the snake in a twisted kind of voice’. A hedgehog who is frightened of motors - being afraid he will become a puncture - is used to prod Vulcan, the horse, into wakefulness. Once they arrive at the market, Grace decorates her hat with the snake, the hedgehog, and the glow-worms to keep them all safe until they return home. The snake remains tied around the hedgehog, “dreaming of how to make both ends meet”. At the end of the busy day at the market, they all fall asleep quickly, Tinkle, Pansy and Blanche each in a slipper, Orlando and Grace in bed, and Vulcan in striped pyjamas in his stable, having left his shoes outside to be cleaned – a delightful picture of four horse-shoes in a row.

The next excitement is the Cattle and Vegetable Show [below], at which Orlando and Grace win gold medals for all their exhibits, including a cow with bows in its ears, a pig with a sash round its waist and a sheep with a bow in its tail. The very detailed picture of the prizegiving shows Orlando and Grace side by side with tails entwined, and Orlando patting Joseph the sheepdog. Although Pansy and Blanche are easily found, one on each shoulder of the farmer’s wife, one has to look harder at the picture to find Tinkle, climbing up a curtain behind “Royalty” who is giving out the prizes.



Continuing through the seasons, we come to harvest time and fruit picking [below], and as well as the cats climbing trees to pick apples, there is a pathetic little picture of Tinkle clutching his tummy having eaten too many fruit-flies, and another of a pale-blue Blanche who has been stung by a wasp on her tail, and has been bathed in blue-bag to ease the pain. Seeing the swelling at the tip of her tail, she fancies herself as a very unusual poodle-cat.



After the winter – a quiet time on the farm – we come to spring. Pansy has an adventure, being mistaken for a brood of chickens by a short-sighted hen and has to be rescued by Grace with a feather broom. Orlando lives in the shepherd's caravan during the lambing season [below] – this is another picture where the kittens are hard to spot. Eventually we see Blanche lying behind a lamb as white as she is, Tinkle by a black-faced sheep, and Pansy is almost under the fleece of another sheep. One can imagine small children having great fun looking for them all.



The book ends with a cosy domestic scene [below] - Orlando and Grace sit by the fire with Joseph the sheepdog, with a bone and a fish backbone in front of them. Looking more closely at this picture, we see that once again there is an unusual angle. The edges of the fire grate in the foreground, with the shovel and poker, show that we are looking from inside the fireplace at the animals on the hearth.

Orlando buys a farm is a delightful example of a book for children which has been created by an author with an obvious enthusiasm for her work, writing and illustrating the books as well as the not inconsiderable work of lithographing the 128 plates required for each full-sized Orlando book – around 5 months' work each time.



The copy held by Reading University Library was donated by Kathleen Hale herself, along with several others, and is a 1972 reprint by Jonathan Cape of the original *Country Life* edition of 1942. More recently it has been reprinted by Frederick Warne. As well as copies of a number of her books in this collection, the Library also holds other Kathleen Hale material. There is correspondence in both the Allen and Unwin, and Chatto and Windus archives, and in the Miscellaneous Prints Collection there is a portfolio of coloured prints from wood blocks by members of the School of Art which includes two items by Kathleen Hale. In the recently acquired Royle archive there are paste-ups of some of the Orlando books, and a number of Christmas and birthday cards featuring Orlando and his family.

In 2002, the University used an adaptation of a Kathleen Hale illustration for the official University Christmas card [below], the original of which was included in an exhibition of her work held at the Gekoski Gallery in 1995.



In May 1978, in her eightieth year, Kathleen Hale made a return visit to St Andrew's Hall, an occasion that was documented in the *University Bulletin* with an article and photograph [below].

It is fitting that with the recent move of the Children's Collection, with the rest of the Rare Books and Archives collections, to the new Special Collections Service on Redlands Road, those wishing to see the Orlando books – and other Kathleen Hale material – will be able to do so in the new Reading Room, in the former St Andrew's Hall where Kathleen lived when a student here 90 years ago.



Kathleen Hale sitting on the stairs in St Andrew's Hall, where she sat listening to carols as a student.

References

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Acknowledgements

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