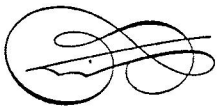
THE HERSTORY OF A BUTTON



Elizabeth Robins

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1962, noted expatriate American writer, left behind a remarkable collection of private papers. Her diaries, drafts of published and unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, and a large amount of photographic material document a literary woman's complex connections to the social movements of her day and to a network of important literary and political figures. The collection, almost one hundred linear feet of boxed papers, held at New York University and only opened to the public in 1985, is a rich source of biographical and literary information. Although some scattered efforts have been made to reprint her works and give Robins appropriate critical attention, and although I have a biography in progress, very little effort has yet been made in publishing some of the unpublished documents from the collection. Given her later achievements — accomplished actress (primarily known for her Ibsen roles), prolific novelist, lobbyist for women's issues and, after she turned sixty, a sometime autobiographer — one of the earliest of her compositions deserves some credit, if only for the coining in its title of the word "herstory."

As modern readers are aware, "herstory" is the feminist alternative to the presumption that "history" tells only "his" story. While the newest edition of the Oxford English Dictionary *fails to include the word, the* Feminist Dictionary *does, including in its first examples of published citations references to the early 1970s. A century earlier, in a school exercise composed when she was twelve and*

attending the Putnam Female Seminary in Zanesville, Ohio, Elizabeth Robins used "herstory," conscious of its feminist content, in her story, "The Herstory of a Button." Told from the point of view of a button who accompanies her mistress to school, the story is a delightful, even poignant, critique of male-centered schooling and history lessons. Other compositions from this period survive and, together with this story, they demonstrate the power of Robins's imagination. One is narrated by a penknife; another presents the changing perceptions of the world of the writer by focusing on the different views from the four windows of a loft room.

Robins's life is truly a story of two centuries and two continents. She was born in 1862 in Louisville, Kentucky, at the height of a thunderstorm, during the war that divided North and South. Her parents were also first cousins, but her mother's gentile upbringing and her father's business acumen were soon in conflict. The family lived on Staten Island while Charles Robins was active on Wall Street. When Elizabeth was only ten, her mother's ill health and father's financial hardships brought her to Zanesville, Ohio, to live with her grandmother and carry on a family tradition of attending the Putnam Female Seminary. Jane Robins, Elizabeth's grandmother, owned a very impressive piece of property in the northern, pro-abolitionist section of Zanesville (formerly Putnam). The "Stone Academy" had been built in 1809 to lure the state legislature to Zanesville; it later functioned as a school and was the site of abolitionist meetings. (The house is the location for the action of The Open Question, Robins's novel of 1898.)

Instead of attending college as her father wished, she pursued her acting talent. Before she left for England in 1888, she had toured the American continent extensively, playing opposite James O'Neill in the early years of his production of The Count of Monte Cristo, and performing repertory with the renowned Boston Museum Theatre

Company as well as with Edmund Booth and Lawrence Barrett.

The 1890s might be designated her Ibsen years, when she was at the forefront of the movement to produce his plays in London. In addition to her acting successes (playing Hilda Wangel, Hedda Gabler, Mrs. Linde, Rebecca West) she worked to sustain an artistically oriented theatre. Simultaneously, she developed her writing talents, publishing novels and stories under a pseudonym and trying her hand at Ibsen-influenced drama.

Robins's associations with the literati in London society during the 1890s inevitably led to her second career as a writer. Before she left America, Boston and New York acquaintances encouraged her to try her hand at authorship. She had started to keep an account of the Booth-Barrett tour, and submitted a short story to an editor of the Home Journal. *As soon as she discovered the excitement of London theatre in 1888, she proposed a series of articles for a Washington D.C. periodical. Throughout her early diaries, she is a self-conscious recorder of many of the details of stage life. Few of her fictionalized experiences of the stage were published. Notable among the many efforts include a very early work of fiction,* The Coming Woman *(1892), and* Theodora: A Pilgrimage *(begun 1911). The first is a novella that endorses the idea of a national "artistic" theatre, as it examines the conditions of the actress under the male-dominated stage management system. She presents thinly disguised portraits of Oscar Wilde, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the playwright Arthur Wing Pinero, and the publisher William Heinemann. A series of short stories begun in 1897 are interesting for their satirical portraits of stage personalities, and* Theodora *is her* bildungsroman *of a young American actress of the 1880s.*

Her Alaska voyage in 1900 resulted in two published novels and a great number of non-fiction accounts, and these established her literary reputation under her own name. Her prominence during the suffrage years — her

speaking at rallies, lobbying, and using her pen for political purpose — is certainly her most important achievement. Her play, Votes for Women, *and the novel based on the same characters and situation,* The Convert *(both 1907), led to her popularity as a spokeswoman for women suffragists in Great Britain. While* Way Stations, *her collection of articles and speeches chronicling her political activity between 1906 and 1913, functions also as partial autobiography, her importance to women's literature is by no means completely restored. Some of her most interesting fiction grew out of her engagement with various issues of women's position in society as her thinking evolved from a pro-British position in 1915 to one critical of the military values endorsed by a patriarchy in her 1924 anonymous treatise,* Ancilla's Share: An Indictment of Sex Antagonism. *Although the critics of her day saw no relevance in her later efforts, between 1918 and 1924 she produced three novels important for their critique of the romantic values that had come to be expected in women's fiction.*

Robins's achievement is not limited to her literary works. In a number of ways, she actively supported women's health issues: she lobbied for better services by helping to found the New Sussex Hospital for Women and Children, worked during part of World War I as a volunteer in the Endell Street Hospital, supported Octavia Wilburforce's medical education, and — with Wilburforce's encouragement — converted her spacious farmhouse in Sussex into a rest home for women. What emerges from almost every significant item in the collection is not only her feminist-centered politics, but, as evident in this earliest piece, her wit and her wisdom.

— Joanne E. Gates

THE HERSTORY OF A BUTTON

Composition dated May 14, 1875,
Composed while Elizabeth Robins attended Putnam Female Seminary,
Zanesville, Ohio.

The first thing that I remember is being on a blue card in a shoemaker's shop. I was only one of four dozen, so, I was not noticed much. I think I had been about two weeks in the shop, when my companions told me that I would not always live on a pretty blue card, but some day I would be sold. I thought I should like a change, and did not object to leaving the card that the others thought so pretty. My chance soon came! A little girl came into the store one day for shoebuttons, and I was destined to be among the dozen she purchased. The little girl slipped us into her pocket, where, although it was very dark, I enjoyed myself very much, for there were cookies, lead pencils, slate pencils, scraps of paper, and a knife, and rubber. I made an acquaintance with these several things and found they all had a story, and was quite vexed to be taken out just as the lead pencil was in the middle of a note that my mistress wrote in school time, and which was very interesting.

The little girl whose name was Nellie, gave us to her mother who proceeded to sew us on some shoes. This greatly enraged my companions, but I did not mind it, and so kept my temper. All night we laid under the bed, and next morning were fished out rather roughly with a broom stick by Nellie, who had thrown us far under the bed on the previous evening. Almost before I knew it we were at the breakfast table, then on the road, and finally in the school room. My little mistress shocked me greatly by writing notes and sometimes whispering during school hours. Things went on this way for nearly a month when all of a

sudden one morning [2] [I dropped off my mistress' shoe] [1] [in the grammar class]. I lay (ER has laid, corrected to lay) on the floor until the class was dismissed, when some one kicked me over into a corner. I felt rather hurt, but like my mistress I was too good-natured to mind little inconveniences, for I could still see, and the next class was history. They talked about Washington, his courage, and bravery, his sword and horse, and I think it was very stupid in them to forget his buttons, for what would "the father of his country" have done without his buttons? At last a naughty child picked me up & snapped me down on the floor again. The teacher asked if that was history, and the bad child answered "Yes ma'm, button history."

[ER's youthful hand adds in black ink: "This naughty child was me."]

The girls giggled, and the teacher smiled, and they went on about Washington never once mentioning his buttons. After that class, came spelling, where I saw Nellie take her place with the others and she missed not a word. As the class was dismissed Nell saw me & put me in her pocket, where the pencil renewed his narrative for my benefit. But alas! A fatal hole appeared in the corner of the pocket through which all my energy could not keep me from falling. I lay in the road until a little prattling baby came along, picked me up & stored me away in her mite of a pocket. Long afterwards Baby's mama found me, and put me away tenderly, for baby had gone where buttons do not fall off. □

Bessie Robins May 14 1875.

(This is in very light, thin, purple ink, filling exactly — a little squeezed at end — both sides of one legal page, lined paper. Someone, presumably her composition teacher, has made slight corrections, the reversal of the two phrases [marked in square brackets], capitalization of Yes, in "yes ma'm," spelling of proceeded, "on" added in "Things went on this way," "laid" changed to "lay.")