

Elizabeth Robins published as herself shortly after the publication of *The Open Question* resulted in the disclosure of her pseudonym

The regular column in *Literature* classified as "Among My Books" featured her recollections of *The British Merlin*:

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See end for details

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## Among my Books.

### THE BRITISH MERLIN.

Any one that has gone gypsying about the world ever since arriving at the years that might have brought discretion has few books that are not recent acquaintances. There is just one here on my shelves in London that has come down to me from the days when I was not tall enough to reach the "grown-up" books, and solaced myself with thinking the volume in question promised better because it, too, was "quite little."

At the risk of admitting a poor taste in literature, I may confess at once that if any book were to keep on turning up, in the North, in the South, surreptitiously following me over seas (by a faithful subterfuge concealing itself in some clothes like a stowaway in a hold)—if all this were to be achieved, it was well from my point of view that the adventure should be essayed by "The British Merlin." Although he came originally from London, I am perhaps his only friend here now. He is of unimposing stature, travel-stained, and scarred. He could never have cut much of a figure, even when the faint gold tooling on his brown leathern jerkin was new and bright—and that was many a year before he and I started out on our travels.

If upon introduction you take too seriously his opening remarks, you may be minded to think him a dull dog, and to turn aside. For he pretends to be a "Royal Kalendar or Annual Register for England, Scotland, Ireland, and America for the Year 1773; Including a compleat and correct List of the 13th Parliament of Great Britain, summoned to meet for their first session on the 10th of May, 1768; and from thence continued by Prorogations to the 26th of November, 1772, when they sat for the Dispatch of Publick Business."

One has sympathy for this false start of Merlin's; one knows all about it oneself—this mournful affectation of being about serious "Business," on making one's first bow to a utilitarian world. But it is not for his Lists of Peers and Commons (although we used to look there for a name as familiar as our own)—it is not for his Royal Army and Navy List—Eclipses, Comets, and Plagues, Tables of Roads of "fixed Fairs and Marts in England and Wales," not for information about Knights of the Garter, nor to learn that the Duke of Northumberland had been Vice-Admiral of all America, the Hon. Robert Cholmondeley Auditor-General of the Plantations, and John Wentworth, Esq., Surveyor-General of the Woods of America for Life—it is not for any such matter that I find on the browned fly-leaf other names than mine setting forth with uncertain childish strokes a claim on "Merlin." If his first observations have not alienated you, you find him capable of turning over a new leaf and discovering his true value. Here, enlivened by a cheerful red lettering, you find yourself face to face with:—

Rider's British Merlin for the Year of our Lord God 1773, being the first after Bissextile or Leap Year, Adorned with many delightful and useful Verities fitting all capacities.

Merlin knows his world and the charms of pseudonymity. Even upon this festive page it is pretended that the work is "Compiled for his Country's Benefit by *Cardanus Rider*." Further to inspire confidence, upon its blushing face is set the brown Duty Stamp.

Well, having made his bow with a grave air and discharged his duty to society, my friend tells you at the top of the next page in a gay red legend, that "*January hath XXXI. days.*" What plenitude in the sound—how full of pleasant promise! Hath January still so many days? or any called Red Letter? Who thinks to tell us now that even a common black-letter date like the 5th is old Xmas Day, that the 11th is Plow Monday—who reminds us to keep Queen Charlotte's birthday on the 18th, or that the 30th is the anniversary of the "martyrdom" of King Charles? Who provides us in these grudging days with a weekly forecast of the weather for the whole of the "year of our Lord God"? It is as easy for Merlin, as to give you in his list of Holy Days the exact date of the conversion of St. Paul, or to tell at what moment in every twenty-four hours it will be high tide at London Bridge. He generously leaves you two blank pages for each month, and he covers one with his own observations, meteorological, horticultural, therapeutical, hygienic, and general; but all so pleasantly, so airily, urged, that the instruction sits lightly. Who would be so churlish as to resent being told in January,

Let not Blood, and use no Physick, unless there be a Necessity; Eat often.

Or in June,

Cooling Sallads, as Letuce, Sorrel, Purslane, &c., will prevent too great a Perspiration, and throw off feverish Disorders. Who would not have a garden, in order next month to obey Merlin's behest:

Sow on shady Borders the Seeds of Polyanthus. Sow Corn Sallad, Marigold, Aniseeds and Dutch Brown Letuce. Set Osiers, Willows, and other Aquaticks. Rub Moss off Trees after Rain.

It isn't very useful, perhaps, but I should like to have Maundy Thursday set down in my Kalendar for '99, Candlemas, Old Mid-Summer Day, Ember Week, Lammas;—and to be reminded on the 2nd of September in a pleasant conversational style : “ London burnt 1666,” or “ Thomas à Becket murdered ”; or that I myself am to “ Hough carrots ” or “ earth up Sellery and Chardoons.” This is to humanize a dry mathematical problem, and give us back our old illusion of man's proud place in a universe of ruthless tides and planets. It is like that kindly warning in one of our daily newspapers :

“ Lighting-up time for cyclists, 6.28 p.m.”

That is to bring Meteorology home to men's bosoms, to emphasize our personal concern in the great business of sun-setting and the coming on of dark.

Had Merlin made my Kalendar for '99 I should feel myself to be so delicately flattered by the solicitude that in October bids him say : “ Avoid being out late at Nights; or in foggy Weather; for a Cold now got, may continue the whole Winter ”—so much would this touch me, that I might at a pinch go the length of following his directions for November : “ If any Distemper afflict you, finish your Physick this Month and so rest till March.”

LITERATURE.

[February 4, 1899.]

If it were not that the perversity of experience is always upsetting reasonable calculation, one might wonder what in this book, beyond its appealing littleness, and its red lettering, made it to be coveted by the very young. It was, perhaps, partly that no one recommended it—it was “a find”; and here and there the names of people whose fame had endured even unto our day becked and nodded to us out of the yellow pages. There was General Gage, a tiresome person to keep track of at school, but quite friendly when encountered unprofessionally. A lot of people seemed to be alive in 1773—Catherine, Empress of all the Russias, Gustavus III. of Sweden, Louis XV., “King of France and Navarre,” and Frederick the Great. There seemed in our time to be people (they were all dreadfully old) who were interested to know that the Thrale mentioned as Member for the Borough of Southwark was “Dr. Johnson’s Thrale,” that King George’s deputy-cofferer was Hans Sloane, and that Edmund Burke represented Wendover, Bucks, in Parliament, and was “Agent to the Province of New York.” Some one underlined the fact that Sir Joshua Reynolds, Kt., was President of the Royal Academy, and that Bartolozzi, Gainsborough, Angelica Kauffman, and Nollekens were Academicians.

But these were all dull discoveries beside the fact that the King had “Pages of the Back Stairs,” and that oddly enough they got more pounds than the “Coffer-Bearers”; that John Yvounet was Royal “Brusher” at Kensington Palace; that Rich. Stonhewer, Esq., was “Knight Harbinger,” and that the King had an “Embellisher of Letters to the Eastern Princes,” whose emolument was less than half that of the “Master of the Tennis Court,” exactly as much as that of the “Deliverer of Greens,” and only a little more than that of the Royal “Ratkiller.” There was a splendid uncertainty about the offices of “Herb. Strewer” and “Spatterdash-makers,” which brought them into eminence with us.

Although not one of our little company shone in the History Class, each could have told you that the "Sedan Chair maker to their Majesties" was Samuel Vaughan; that in 1773 Mary Rickley swept out the Courts at St. James's, and that the Royal "Rockers" were Mrs. Rhelingen and Mary Meales.

As I turn over the pages to-day I am struck with the evidence of the superior esteem in which women were held a century and a quarter ago. In nearly every Department there is this entry, without explanation or further ado: "Necessary Woman." Then follows her salary. You find her everywhere. She is indispensable to the Clerks of the Council in Ordinary, to every one of the King's Households, to George Augustus Frederick, Prince of Wales. Merlin gives you the name of the "Woman" who was "Necessary" to the Northern Department of the Secretary of State, to the Southern Department; "Necessary Woman" to the American Department, to the Commissioners of Trade and Plantations, to the Admiralty—you meet the concise and flattering admission wherever you turn. As if this were not enough, you find taking precedence of Antiquary Society and British

February 4, 1899.]

## LITERATURE.

Museum "The Laudable Society for the Benefit of Widows." And some people talk of Progress !

Give me back the days when it could be said :  
"America, the Fourth Part of the World, and of latest discovery, consisteth of these two parts—Mexicana or North America, Peruviana or South America. The Provinces of Mexicana are New Spain, Florida, New Albany, New England, New France or Canada. The chief islands are Newfoundland and California."

C. E. RAIMOND (Elizabeth Robins).

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**GRUB STREET.**

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Comments continue below.



Image of top of first page for the issue of February 4, showing Contents page 105.

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<b>BOOKMEN IN PARLIAMENT.</b>	
The Parliament which meets next Tuesday has reached	

House of Commons, though its links with fashionable society are less than they were, is still more closely allied to it than is the case in any other democratic country, and reflects to some extent its culture, or the absence of it. But we may console ourselves for the deficiencies of the average M.P. by noting one very remarkable circumstance, which is, in Carlylean phrase, "significant of much."

Lord Rosebery, in his recent speech on Literary Statesmen, did not venture to discuss living politicians; nor would he be likely indeed to suggest the circumstance to which we allude save, in those communings with his own heart which have recently been for him almost the only form of political activity. But if he had let his mind run over the names of the gentlemen who compose Lord Salisbury's Cabinet, and those who composed the two preceding ones, he could hardly fail to be struck by two notable features of their composition. The first is that out of thirty-five ministers ten only have, or have had, any direct connection with literature either as authors or journalists. The second feature is still more worthy of attention. Two of these literary politicians have retired into private life. Of the remaining eight, three have become Prime Ministers; two have risen to be leaders of their party in the House of Commons; and a sixth, though not the leader of a party, has been so near becoming one that he has found it necessary to disclaim his candidature.

Now this may not give any ground for undue optimism. It may do little to support the belief that the democratic Parliament of to-day is, or is likely to become, as cultivated a body as the oligarchic Parliament of a century ago. But it does go to show that culture is a necessary equipment for the highest statesmanship. At one time in America there was a widespread prejudice against literary politicians, and to be learned or to possess a valuable library was almost a fatal disqualification to one who aspired to be President. And there has been some-

*Among my Books* was a regular feature of *Literature*, a Saturday supplement to *The Times*.

Accessed through Google Books. University of Minnesota Library.

Link to the full volume IV January to June 1899, with location marker at the front page for February 4:

<https://www.google.com/books/edition/Literature/M4U4AQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Literature+No+68+Saturday+February+4,+1899&pg=PA105&printsec=frontcover>

Due to the cover and preliminary pages which preface this volume, numbered page 115 will be page 121 in the pdf file.

Given that the mid-December revelations that the publications of C. E. Raimond were identified as authored by Elizabeth Robins, this is the first compositions by her since the 1890 essay in her own name, *Across America with the Junius Brutus Booth*, <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/docshort/acramjbb.html>. *The Daily Chronicle* published her letter to the editor of 16 December of 1898 justifying her rationale for a pseudonym, reproduced from her scrapbook at: <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/openq/opqaddre.html>

Under C. E. Raimond, Robins had published 3 novels, a collection of short stories, along with several others remaining uncollected or published anonymously.

She was of course primarily known during this decade as actor of Ibsen roles.

Note that Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" is published on same page as Robins. During the suffrage years, Kipling would publish (in 1911) the poem "The Female of the Species" which suffrage militants took as an affront. Its last verse points out: "And Man knows it! Knows, moreover, that the Woman that God gave him / Must command but may not govern—shall enthrall but not enslave him." Especially offensive, perhaps is Kipling's use of his refrain line, That the Female of Her Species is more deadly than the Male, illustrating his thesis with the fierce behavior of cobras, bears, and the Chocktaw and Huron tribes of Native Americans whom the Jesuits encountered. See the Kipling Society for that poem and its contexts, [http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/rg\\_female1.htm](http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/rg_female1.htm)

Page images for an earlier edition of *The British Merlin* can be found at *Open Library*, a copy from John Adams Library. Perhaps the interspersed red ink was an additional attraction to a very young Anglophile:

[https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25492957M/Rider's\\_British\\_Merlin](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25492957M/Rider's_British_Merlin)

Correction from the biography published in 1994. The date of the essay is inaccurate on page 283. Sue Thomas has the correct date.

