

Stitches in a Critical Time: The Diaries of Elizabeth Robins, American Feminist in England, 1907-1924

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"I find I have not written in this book since the 24th," Elizabeth Robins jotted in her diary on 2 September 1914. "I will gather up the dropped stitches as well as I may."¹

Such infrequent lapses of a few days Robins often compared to dropped stitches, and she usually caught up those missed days and recorded the events of her busy life. More often, she made regular daily entries, and pieced together, one day after another, the curt phrases of a detailed account of her life. An American-born expatriate in London, noted as actress, suffrage writer, and novelist, Robins kept a diary from the summer of her 18th year, in 1880, to the mid 1940s. Although some years are only recorded in tiny engagement books, and though some of the 1890s diaries were destroyed, the sixty years of extant diaries leave a remarkable legacy of a woman greatly influenced by and greatly influencing her time.

My focus in this paper covers the years 1907 to 1924, years important for Robins's involvement with suffrage and women's political issues, and years remarkably free from long lapses in keeping the record of her life. Her dated entries, in uniform volumes designed much like account books, grew for Robins to become the essential fabric of her life. She treats the earlier years of her career in several autobiographical volumes, all closely dependent on her diary accounts.² Except for the impersonal *Way Stations* (an important anthology of her speeches and articles reprinted with "Time Tables," or commentaries linking the articles with intervening political developments), her letters and diaries are the only source for her politically active years,

years in which Robins also published six novels, completed almost as many volumes of fiction which remain unpublished, wrote plays, adapted one of her plays as a novel and one of her novels to the stage, and delivered countless speeches. The prose in her diaries, taken as a whole, is not remarkable; there are only infrequent extended passages which spill beyond the half-dozen lines allotted for each given date. This is no *Chronicle of Youth* with Vera Brittain's passionate feelings. Nor is it *A Writer's Diary* in the sense that it compares to Virginia Woolf's pithy commentary. But that is not to say that Robins was not a diarist of great insight. Besides the day-to-day record, she kept a separate volume of year-end reflections and various idea notebooks and travel diaries. Robins's journals are samplers in very plain stitching, not an elaborate tapestry of literary or artistic merit, yet the value of the diaries of these years goes much beyond her visible contributions to suffrage history. My aim here is to argue that the diaries are crucial both to identifying her place in history and to revealing how her personality emerges when her private writing fills in the outlines of the historical facts. Taken together, her self portrait and her historical position locate her in an important gallery of notable American women—women who, like Edith Wharton, the writer, and Nancy Astor, the socialite and politician, found a place for themselves once they had left these shores. Robins kept her diary faithfully from the months she was revising the proofs for publication of *The Convert* in 1907 to her preparation for publication of the feminist-pacifist essay *Ancilla's Share* in 1924. These diaries prove to be the essential documents through which we can examine the life of a professional writer transformed by the feminist movement.

One way in which the diaries reveal Elizabeth Robins's important political role is that they show how she was connected to the leadership of the WSPU. When Christabel Pankhurst went underground, for instance, in response to warrants out for her arrest in March, 1912, at the height of the police antagonism against Militant Suffragettes, Robins notes in her diary that the rumors spread through her rural Sussex community just north of Brighton that

Robins herself was providing sanctuary for Christabel. The rumors were erroneous, founded only on the general observations that Christabel was a sometimes visitor to Backsettown, the centuries-old farmhouse in Henfield which Robins had purchased and restored from the sales of her suffrage novel, *The Convert*.

Robins was a board member of the WSPU. She presided as president of the Women Writers Suffrage League. Her speeches, letters to editors, articles, fiction, and the play, *Votes for Women*, established her as a leading spokeswoman for The Cause. But the important place Elizabeth Robins had in suffrage leadership has remained as hidden from history as Christabel's whereabouts did from the police. Although *The Convert* has been republished with an introduction by Jane Marcus, modern feminists have yet to accord Robins her full role in the English Suffrage movement. *Way Stations* provides only the barest log of her main activities of the period 1906 to 1913. Her stage play, *Votes for Women* (upon which *The Convert* was based), had productions in London, New York, and Chicago. In two revealing letters to her sister-in-law, Margaret Dreier Robins, are preserved the circumstances under which Robins was aroused to support actively the suffrage cause. She explains that at a meeting to address the issue she was brought to her feet to speak out spontaneously against the "gross unfairness of the press in its attitude towards the recent agitation in favor of Women's Suffrage."³ Her remarks attracted such attention that she was called upon over and over to speak. She declined the early appeals, reasoning that there were "Heaps of admirable speakers, few or no concerned writers,"⁴ and began at once the scenario of *Votes for Women*. When she no longer could refuse the appeals to speak, the diaries describe how thoroughly she prepared and rehearsed her public appearances. She frequently contributed articles, short stories, and letters to editors, and assisted at many WSPU fund-raising events. Her novel of White Slave Traffic sold widely and helped to revive a Morals and Hygiene Committee. Her defense of militant tactics when such practices were unpopular policy and her later criticism of the Pankhursts' strategies

show how central her position is to a full understanding of the suffrage movement. She took an active part in Henfield's local Women's Institute, spoke on behalf of Women's Institutes and the Food Ministry throughout England and Ireland, served as chair of the Board of Directors for the New Sussex Hospital, and was on the organizing Board of *Time and Tide*. Thanks to the preservation of her diaries there is yet a greater chance to demonstrate that Robins had a significant presence—not simply in the visible leadership and organization of the WSPU, but in all ways that women's lives were transformed by the Suffrage Movement. During one of the largest protest actions of the movement, when women refused to comply with the census in 1911, Robins proudly recorded in her diary: "I wrote across the census paper: 'The occupier of this house will be ready to give the desired information as soon as the Government recognizes women as responsible citizens'" (ER Diary, 3 April 1911).

What emerges from the diaries are the ways in which Robins, as an American very much removed from her native landscape during this period of political turmoil, used her American roots and her family's personal legacy—diaries and letterbooks of mother, father, and grandmother, as well as her own earlier diaries—to explore her heritage and reweave her life records into several remarkable volumes of autobiographical fiction. Though these volumes remain unpublished, they shape Robins's later autobiographical style, marked by her penchant for the telling details of a life at the center of social and artistic change. Robins had tapped her growing up years in the American Midwest and portrayed her homestead and the character of her grandmother in *The Open Question*, published under a pseudonym in 1898. Most conspicuous among the uses of her diaries as source for fiction is the amount of material she drew from the 1900 diary she kept while traveling to the gold rush on the beaches of Nome, Alaska. But it took the political years to provide Robins with renewed associations with her past. In the early years of the first World War, she returned to her "Diary from Dixie"—recorded ten years earlier when she first visited the Florida

land she had purchased with her brother—and used it as the basis for *Camilla*, her novel in which a divorced American woman of means reclaims her Southern roots. Robins turned to her diary of 1914-1915 when she recaptured the first days of the war in her spy novel, *The Messenger*.

There is little doubt that Robins's link to her past inspired the dutiful keeping of her daily record. Robins carried on what she herself termed a "double life," and recorded the incidents of each in a patchwork of her day's routine. Fiction was her large creative enterprise. Urgent demands of politics were equally important. She is present at the crisis in leadership of the WSPU when the Pankhursts force the resignation of the Pethick-Lawrences. (Her extended entry of 11 October 1912 details the last critical meeting of the Board.) She visits Constance Lytton, still debilitated four years after her forcible feeding, and is so struck afresh at the horrors of the court-approved torture as manifested in Lady Constance's handicaps—"her terrible weakness, the dragging leg, the useless curled up hand, the panting laboured speech"—that she drafts letters to authorities urging that her book, *Prisons and Prisoners*, be acknowledged as testament of her sacrifice (ER Diary, 29 March, 1914).

Robins stepped in to mediate when Madame Thayer objected to the Lyceum Club's sponsorship of the noted Black American W.E.B. DuBois. Robins quickly dropped her other activities, read *The Souls of Black Folk*, drafted, and rehearsed the speech of introduction for DuBois.⁵ Each of Robins's speeches, as with this one delivered at the Lyceum Club, took days of preparation. Did she consider them interruptions? On the contrary, they were the rich fabric of her life, even when long stretches of time away from her latest novel forced her, as she often put it, to pick up the thread again as if it were the unravelled pattern of an earlier creator.

In the midst of one of her busiest political periods, in 1910, she began a retrospective study of her own youth. Called at first "Wilhelmina Meister,"

then "A Study in Egoism," and finally "Theodora: A Pilgrimage," the fictional autobiography traces her early impulses to succeed as actress on the New York stage of the 1880s. The feminism inspired by Elizabeth Robins's present encouraged the look at her youth. "Horrid girl," she remarks upon looking back at her earliest journal. But the attraction to the project of bringing to life her fiercely independent former self spurred her on. She scanned old volumes of the *New York Herald* and re-read Clara Morris's *Life of a Star*.

Robins managed to complete only the first part of a projected trilogy during the political years, but two other nearly complete manuscripts survive, one focusing on her father's gold mining ambitions, the other on "Theodora's" early acting career. Years later, the family history project generated another full-length novel. This ambitious and masterful "Rocky Mountain Journal" (written 1927-1930 and never published) weaves the story of a daughter's stage ambitions against the father's hopes to excite her to the natural splendor of the Colorado Mountains. A background of strong family traditions offsets the large scale business swindling. Robins's late mastery of her autobiographical sources demonstrates just how strongly her political commitments competed with her large scale fictional projects during the period in which she had her widest audience.

When she was nearing the completion of her work on the story of a young girl's abduction into White Slavery (published as *My Little Sister*), Robins attended Police Court hearings and, in one phenomenal excursion, put on the dress of a Salvation Army Officer and visited the haunts of street men and women. The uniform did not put her at ease in her part. In one of her longest extended entries in the regular diary, begun in the space for July 25, 1912, and extending over several memoranda pages, Robins described the discomfort of appealing to young girls, some of them hardened, some of them timid, many garishly painted, all of them prostitutes.

"Will you take one of my cards?" Elizabeth Robins repeated over and over to women who responded with only indifference, suspicion, or mockery. When Robins finally succeeded in making contact with one young girl, she presented herself not as the Salvation Army worker but as someone "not used to this, & I shan't be here again. I live in the country. Just once in all my life I am here and able to speak to you." Robins experienced the girl's tirade against Christianity and its service agencies, but she persuaded the young girl to come to her flat the next day. With her London housemate, Robins shared plans to receive and save the girl. The hours of pacing the floors—expecting, hoping for her arrival—left Robins as emotionally torn as her desperate street excursion of the night before. Days later, she was still disturbed by the nighttime visions: "I find myself haunted still by that 1 1/2 hours—bruised mentally by the sights and sounds of Coventry Street at 12:30 to 2:00 a.m. I keep thinking what is it that is so horrible and painful? Then I remember. I practically knew it all before so I don't know why at my age the scene should eat into my consciousness like an acid."

Though Robins often had to refuse appeals to speak or take up her pen, she brought a stature to the cause and a prestige to the many smaller women's movements. When the press declared a boycott on the news of the Coronation Suffrage Pageant of June, 1911, it was Elizabeth Robins who called editors, got an article placed, and overnight, drafted, edited, and read the proofs of her account. Her short story "Under His Roof," a Poe-like nightmare in which guilty conscience eats away the foundations of a beautiful home (similar in structure to Robins's own house), had a conspicuously feminist message, and because of that, was refused by several editors. When Robins realized "No one wants it," she had it privately printed, and sold signed copies to benefit the Women Writers Suffrage League.

Robins risked estrangement from her oldest and best friend, Lady Florence Bell, on the issue of suffrage militancy. But even at its most strained, the relationship with Lady Bell included a sharing of their creative work. Bell

opened her house in Northallerton, Yorkshire, to Elizabeth Robins, and Robins found it a necessary retreat for her writing. Several times the two collaborated on writing projects; at the least, each was always the other's closest audience. During the War, Lady Bell coordinated volunteer efforts at her local hospital and helped relocate Belgian refugees. Robins was equally active during the War years. She drove herself to exhaustion in the first year of work in a London hospital (the Endell St. Hospital, organized by Dr. Flora Murray and run entirely by women to aid servicemen) and afterwards continued to schedule speaking engagements, hospital visits, and fund-raising benefits.

Henry James resigned his U.S. citizenship in protest of America's hesitation to disassociate itself from Germany. Elizabeth Robins's response was more than symbolic. Her contribution to the War effort was a continuation of her suffrage activism. She continued to write timely and insightful articles which brought the contributions of women to the light. Although her early position sought to validate women's efforts to win the war, her evolving feminist stance led, eventually but inevitably, to her indictment of militarism in a 1924 political tract, *Ancilla's Share*.

In an extended retrospective entry on her 57th birthday in August, 1919, Elizabeth Robins acknowledged the burdens of her "double duty." She wonders whether she ought to give up fiction (as she had turned away from the stage 25 years earlier) and devote herself to the "Realities, to writing about women's affairs and trying all I know to make the better counsels prevail." To do both at once she admitted, made for conflict. Fiction required health, solitude, and long weeks without interruptions. The political work, the requests to serve on committees and write on behalf of appeals, could easily have become at this time the exclusive calling. Personal reasons compel her to perform still the double duty. She resolved, while health still endured, not to give up fiction, for she needed its income to help establish her younger companion Octavia Wilberforce in her endeavor to become a

doctor. (In doing so, Robins unconsciously inherited what had been her father's hope for his daughter, for he had wanted to send Elizabeth to college to study medicine.) It became clear that this resolution, worked out in her diary, prompted the next novel. Political writing grew no less urgent, either, for her participation in the directorship of the women's paper, *Time and Tide*, expanded into the ambitious theoretical treatise, *Ancilla's Share*, subtitled "An Indictment of Sex Antagonism." "I am torn," she commented near the end of the 1919 diary entry. "Very well. It is proof of the continued richness of life that I may still choose (or have the illusion of choosing). It must yet awhile be a double duty, fiction and what I can't escape of my share in graver business."

Two birthdays later, when she turned 59, Robins again confronted her tendencies to throw herself into a calling and wear herself down. She reflected: "My birthday. As I wind my Mother's watch I wonder who wound it if wound it was 59 years ago. How little changed that piece of time, while I..."

At that point in her life, Robins was still fully embarked on the double life of fiction and politics. The birthday renews her waylaid fiction, and she takes fresh hold of her latest plot, the story of affection and collaborative partnership between an elderly widower and a middle-aged widow. *Time is Whispering*, published to popular success with several successive printings in 1923, blends romance and political vision. It is the culmination of Robins's years of double life, entered in the diaries as patchwork notes, filled out in the creative work as perfect weave of art and politics. While her diaries do not in themselves elevate Robins's literary achievement to superlative status nor her political contributions to those which are unmistakably influential, they do go far to explain how someone with major achievements in both fields presents complex issues for her biographer.

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Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, manuscript citations are from the Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library, NYU. A complete bibliography of published and unpublished works by Robins appears in my dissertation, "'Sometimes Suppressed and Sometimes Embroidered': The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952," University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1987.

2. *Theatre and Friendship*, Raymond and I, Both Sides of the Curtain, and the unpublished "Whither and How?"

3. ER to MDR, 6 November 1906, in the Margaret Dreier Robins Papers of the Women's Trade Union League, Reel 20, frame 227.

4. ER to MDR, MDR Papers, Reel 20, frame 303.

5. ER Diary, 4 February 1911. Robins's speech does not survive, but her correspondence to Florence Bell details her impressions of DuBois and the event. DuBois's remarks and some of the correspondence related to the controversy are preserved in the W.E.B. DuBois Collection, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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