



## Classics in Short No.111

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

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Classics in Short

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### **Uncle Lubin** and the first sighting of **Heath Robinson Contraptions**

#### **Sick**

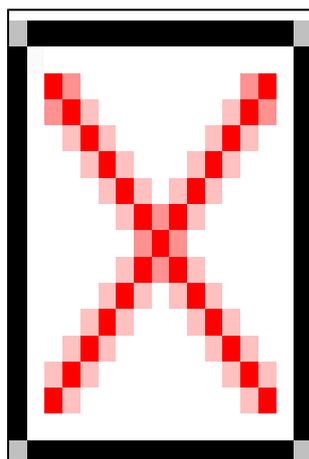
with some childish ailment, I was lent a book by a neighbour. He knew my predilection for railways ? the real ones, with steam engines, and guards, and posh dining cars ? and thought I might enjoy this picture book celebrating the 1935 centenary of the old Great Western.

#### **He was lucky to get it back.**

For here were railway activities from Madland, all the madder for taking themselves absolutely seriously: the clerk sitting on the front of an engine, with notebook and a suspended alarm clock, checking the entries for the first timetable; a whole pageful of nineteen employees and charladies cleaning all the parts of a dismembered locomotive ? one later finishing it off with a powder-puff. This was **Railway Ribaldry** by the (unknown to me) W Heath Robinson.

#### **Ten years or so later,**

I discovered that this man, who had given an adjectival phrase to the English language for his designs of fantastic gadgets, had done many book illustrations before those were ever thought of. A favourite bookstall in Exeter?s covered market charged me all of three shillings for a fat and slightly wobbly copy of **Hans Andersen?s Fairy Tales** printed, surprisingly, for Boots Pure Drug Company. This turned out to be, according to Geoffrey Beare?s richly informative book on WHR?s illustrations (1983), the sixth edition (1927) of a very stylish gift-book edition first published by Constable in 1913. (Andersen seems to have been a Robinson speciality. The very first book commission that he ever received was for an edition of the stories in 1897, followed by a more elaborate affair, done with his brothers Thomas and Charles in 1902, which went through some thirteen reprints.)



**By 1902 however**

Robinson claimed that he was being trailed by a homunculus in a tall hat and a buttoned-up long coat whose story he

was being prevailed upon to write and illustrate. So it was that in 1903 **The Adventures of Uncle Lubin** was published as Robinson's first authorial work, and was one of marked originality in a period by no means lacking in that quality. Uncle Lubin, now as a pictorial manifestation of Robinson's down-at-heels Good Genius, reaches us in Episode One, carelessly allowing his nephew Peter to be stolen by a wicked Bag-bird, and only after twelve adventures is a triumphant recovery effected. (That happens entirely by accident. Uncle Lubin has suffered a bombardment of coconuts from a very tall tree which it takes him two days and a night to ascend, but there at the top is Peter in the Bag-bird nest among all the little Bag-chicks.)

### **It must be said**

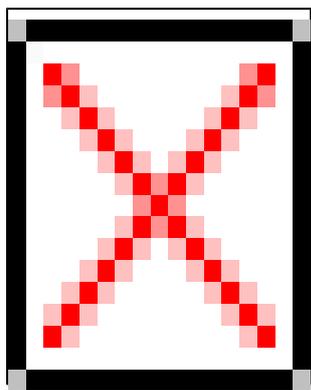
that the book is inconsequential from beginning to end ? as is a successor volume, **Bill the Minder** (1912). The reason may well be that, when young, WHR used to write stories on a school-slate with the result that no story could exceed the scribal area of the slate. Brevity was needful and continuity difficult once the slate was filled, so that progress occurred only through semi-connected passages. What mattered, however, was not the continuities (unfortunately the beady-eyed bird is almost entirely eased out of the story by Uncle Lubin's separate adventures) but the crazy events of his hunt, and the brilliant graphic construction of their presentation.

### **Each story**

follows the same pattern. At the start of each one there is a full-page chapter title lettered in red (blue in a later edition) with a single black and white drawing emblematic of the coming adventure; that adventure is then told in anything from seven to thirteen double page spreads. On the left-hand page of each spread is a red (later blue) pictorial initial and a single drawing, followed by black text. (The story-texts are very short and are amusingly arranged in different typographic shapes, often dwindling to a string of lines of one word each.) The page opposite consists of a full-page monochrome drawing (in three instances there are drawings across the spread). Each story ends with a pictorial conclusion.

### **The random wanderings**

that Peter's enthusiastic but hapless Uncle undertakes may be seen as the essence of Heath Robinson. He



constructs a balloon (filled from the domestic gas supply) and goes to the moon, which fortunately is in its crescent phase so he can hang his belongings on it; he visits mer-children in a home-made submarine (having cunningly despatched a sea-serpent in the previous story); he successfully melts a stalagmite with a candle but it falls on his head and knocks him over ... Every drawing is not only full of comic detail but a wonder of graphic organisation on the page.

### **Although there are hints**

throughout **Uncle Lubin** of incipient Heath Robinson contraptions, it was only after the book's publication that a man from the Lamson Paragon Company, concerned with commercial products, recognised in the illustrator the makings of an advertising draftsman and the way was opened for the inventiveness that was to produce **Railway Ribaldry** and so much else. Far from fading with the period in which it was rooted, Heath Robinsonism has come to be increasingly revered; in recent years an HR Trust has been formed through whose vigorous sponsorship a **Heath Robinson Museum** is to be sited at Pinner, where he and his family lived for a few years after 1909. Much is to be learned of this venture

via Google and readers are urged to check its progress ? if only to reassure themselves that the building is not likely to follow any designs based on Heath Robinsonian principles; it will not depend upon hairy string.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0-71235-728-9, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

**The Adventures of Uncle Lubin** by W Heath Robinson, 978-0-48649-821-8, Dover Children's Books, £10.99

**Railway Ribaldry** by W Heath Robinson, 978-1-90840-294-3, Old House, £10.00

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