

November: Robins

My favourite bird book is called 'The Charm of Birds'. Published in 1927, it has the most good-natured of prefaces: 'This book will have no scientific value. Those who have studied birds will not find in it anything they do not already know; those who do not care for birds will not be interested in the subject'.



My reason for looking the book out again was for its chapter on hand-feeding robins in winter. I was prodded in this by a robin following me around the churchyard, hopping along the fence, and then two robins in our garden, one with its territory at the top and the other at the bottom, who watched me as I potted and pruned. I couldn't tell if they

were boys or girls: it is impossible to differentiate the sexes of robins by just looking (impossible for us humans, that is – robins are very good at it). Indeed, traditionally robins were thought of as males and wrens as the females:

'The robin and the wren /Are God Almighty's cock and hen'

Both sexes establish, and fiercely protect, their territories at this time of year, only sharing come spring and the breeding season. [*Alciato's Emblematia*](#) of 1531 includes the epigram, '*Unum arbustum geminos non alit erithacos*' – one bush does not nourish two robins. As well as obvious aggressive territoriality, both sexes also sing throughout year (except during the summer moult), a wistful and melancholic liquid song in a minor key. They also sing before dawn and after dusk, or later now we have street lamps¹. *Autumn Robin* by our local poet, John Clare, begins with:

*Sweet little Bird in russet coat
The livery of the closing year
I love thy lonely plaintive note
And tiney whispering song to hear
While on the stile or garden seat*

Robins have a long history of living closely with humans and of hanging around for crumbs and titbits. I remember my grandmother (in her tiny kitchen, turban-like scarf on her head and a cigarette, with a seemingly impossible length of ash,

¹ The robin's song has therefore been mistaken for nightingale's, just as collared doves' 'whoo **whoo** whoo' gets confused with cuckoos' despite its three, not two, syllable song.

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dangling from the corner of her mouth) had a robin that would come to the open window and sit on the sill to be hand-fed scraps of bacon rind, carefully scraped from breakfast plates. Wordsworth also described robins coming in through his window for breakfast with his wife, Sarah.

In the children's rhyme:

*The north wind shall blow, and we shall have snow
And what will poor robin do then?
Poor thing!*

Well he might sit in a barn, or might come into the church. William Wager, writing in 1500 described a robin living inside the church in winter: *Robin redbreast with his notes/ Singing aloft in the quire*. While John Skelton, around 1550, had another robin in a church who sang a complete mass: *And robin redbreast,/ He shall be the priest /The requiem mass to sing, / Softly warbling...*



The author of *Charm of Birds*, Edward Grey, is perhaps best remembered as Sir Edward, later Viscount Lord Grey of Fallodon, Britain's longest-serving Foreign Secretary. He is most famous nowadays for his remark to a friend in 1914, on the eve of the First World War. As he looked out of his office window in London at the gas street lights being lit, he said, 'the lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them again in our lifetime'. You may remember that, echoing this, many public buildings dimmed their lights on 4th August, 2014, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of that 'war to end all wars'. All his life, Grey's recreation was observing birds. Even when he lost his sight, he would listen to their song (and fly-fish by touch). He was not in any way a 'twitcher', always chasing the rare – rather his book is about the pleasure we can all get from observing common birds, and, importantly, sharing that pleasure with others. After his death, in 1933, the University of Oxford established the [Edward Grey Institute for Field Ornithology](#), which still undertakes cutting edge ecological, behavioural and conservation research.

Robins were originally called ruddocks, then red-breasts, then robin redbreasts; Shakespeare used all three names. Alliterative Robin alone, the diminutive of Robert, doesn't commonly appear until the 18th century. The robin is one of very few British birds that has adopted a human name – magpie, jackdaw and Jenny

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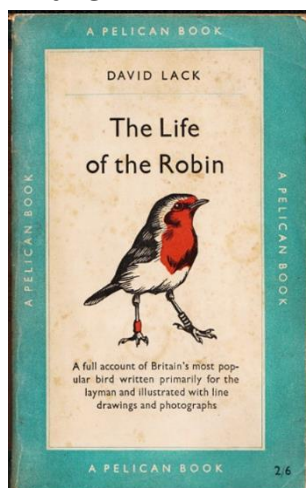
wren – and the only one to have kept only its Christian name. Robins are also given human names in some other languages. In his poem *The Redbreast and the Butterfly*, Wordsworth wrote:

*...Art thou the Peter of Norway Boors?
Their Thomas in Finland,
And Russia far inland?*

Robins eat seeds and small insects, and they follow close behind large farm animals in the hope of finding worms in the churned up ground. They do the same with us whenever we dig the garden or otherwise disturb the soil. This extends to graveyards as well, and may be the origin of the folkloric idea that robins show charity to the dead, covering our graves in moss and leaves. Robert Herrick, the 17th century poet and vicar, wrote *To Robin Redbreast*:

*Laid out for death, let thy last kindness be
With leaves and moss-work for to cover me;
And, while the wood-nymphs my cold corpse inter,
Sing thou my dirge, sweet-warbling chorister!
For epitaph, in foliage, next write this:
Here, here the tomb of Robin² Herrick is!*

For their trust in us, we returned with respect for them. Killing or trapping a robin or disturbing its nest brought back luck, growths, arthritis and animal disease. ‘A robin redbreast in a cage / puts all heaven in a rage,’ wrote William Blake.



The best book about robins, *The Life of the Robin*, was written by David Lack in 1943, two years before he became Director of the Grey Institute. It is ‘dedicated to all those robins who patiently bore my rings and permitted my intrusions into the intimacies of their lives’. As well as describing their behaviour and ecology, based on years of field observation, he also wrote of their literary and folkloric history, and noted that Victorian

postmen wore red waistcoats, and hence were nicknamed robins – this at the time when Christmas cards were being developed. Early cards depicted postie-



² I love that Robert becomes Robin in this last line.

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robins but avian robins quickly took their place as bringers of Christmas greetings, although often with a strange and morbid Victorian twist.

By the way, many cards (and many poems – Emily Dickinson wrote loads) depict American rather than European robins (here as painted by [John Audubon](#)). The American robin is completely different, belonging to the thrush family - although still red-breasted and, like many thrushes, a great songster. They seem to have got their names when early English settlers arrived in the Americas, and knowing little natural history (or, indeed, anything very practical) misnamed them³. It's these rockin' American robins that come bob, bob, bobbing along every Christmas.



How did Edward Grey get robins to feed from his hand? With a little patience.

'The bird is first attracted by crumbs of bread thrown on the ground; then a meal-worm is thrown to it; then a box – such as one of the small boxes in which chemists sell lozenges – is placed open on the ground with meal-worms in it. When the bird has become used to this, the next step is to kneel down and place the back of one hand upon the ground with the box open on the upturned

palm... This is the most difficult stage, but robins will risk their lives for meal-worms, and the bird will soon face the fingers and stand on them... The final stage, that of getting the bird to come to on to the hand when raised above the ground is easy. The whole process may be a matter of only two or three days in hard weather when birds are hungry... confidence has been established and does not diminish when weather becomes mild and food plentiful.' Grey (rightly) assumes males are easier to tame than females, who in the breeding season will get the males to collect mealworms for them. His first robin, White Feather, *'became very tame, and after satisfying his appetite would sometimes sit on the hand so long it was necessary to give him a gentle hint to go.'*

³ Apparently the colonists were also surprised to find turkeys in their new home. Turkeys were brought to Europe by the Spanish, but by the time they arrived in England were assumed to come from the east – maybe Turkey? The French were even worse, assuming they came from India, hence *poulet d'Inde* or *dinde/dindon*.