



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

## CHARLES ROBINSON (1870 - 1937)



Robinson, Charles. *Charles Robinson and Walter Jerrold*. 1912. Reproduction of a line drawing. *The Big Book of Fables*. Ed. Walter Jerrold. London: Blackie & Son, 1912. 293.

The second son of the wood-engraver and illustrator Thomas Robinson, Charles was born in Islington in 1870. Unlike his artist brothers Tom and William, he was never able to study art

full time. He attended the Highbury School of Art for a short time before being apprenticed to the lithographic printers

Waterlow and Sons. On completing his apprenticeship, he enrolled at the Royal Academy schools, but almost immediately abandoned his studies there due to lack of finances, continuing at evening classes at the West London School of Art and at Heatherley's.

An instinctive draughtsman and colourist, Robinson did not find this lack of formal training an impediment to his career as an illustrator. His first published drawings were for three children's primers published by MacMillan, and their favourable review in *The Studio* magazine, followed by an article on his work the following month (E.B.S.) got his career off to a flying start in 1895. The editor of that magazine introduced him to the publisher John Lane, who commissioned him to illustrate an edition of Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* in the same year. Drawing on a variety of sources for inspiration, including Dürer's engravings, early Venetian printing, and the more contemporary ideas of William Morris and Walter Crane, Robinson produced a series of decorative and original illustrations which, together with his overall design for the book, won him wide acclaim. In 1896 he made a

drawing for Volume 11 of *The Yellow Book* called "The Child World." He also produced a number of parodies of Beardsley's style that were published in a yellow-bound booklet with a text by Robinson as "Christmas Dreams" by Awfly Wierdly.

Over the next ten years he was inundated with commissions for book and magazine work, initially in black and white, but increasingly in colour as well; for some of the coloured work he was able to employ his skills as a lithographer. Inevitably, some of his work from this period shows signs of haste, and on occasions he even adapted discarded drawings by his brothers to meet a pressing commission. But at his best, Robinson showed a sureness and facility of line, and an unflinching appreciation of the decorative possibilities of illustration rarely equalled by his contemporaries.

The royalties from his edition of *A Child's Garden of Verses* and the commissions that followed provided the security he needed to marry Edith Mary Favatt in April 1897. The wedding guests included John Lane and Evelyn Sharp, and the ceremony was conducted by Percy Dearmer. Their first home was in West End Lane, Hampstead. When their first child, named after her mother, was born in 1898, the future looked secure for the young family. However, by 1910 when their sixth and last child, Geoffrey, was born, work was harder to come by, and well paid only for those artists commercially in the first rank. Charles was therefore fortunate to have married a wife who, although not an artist herself, proved to be a constant source of support and encouragement to him.

The onset of the First World War brought considerable hardship to Robinson and his family. The years leading up to the war had seen him produce some of his finest work in colour, including *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett and *The Sensitive Plant* by Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1911, *The Big Book of Fables* by Walter Jerrold and *Bee: Princess of Dwarves* by Anatole France in 1912 and, perhaps the best of his books, Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* in 1913. However, for these books Charles Robinson earned nothing like the sums paid to Arthur

Rackham and Edmund Dulac, or even to his brother William. With the restrictions imposed by the war, opportunities for book illustration were few and Robinson was reduced to such mundane tasks as decorative lettering for story titles in magazines. He tried his hand at both humorous drawing and advertising, but with little success. Being too old for the regular forces, he enrolled as a member of the Volunteer Training Corps during the hostilities, and reached the rank of Second Lieutenant.

After the war, work from magazines such as *The Graphic*, *Pearson's Magazine*, *Pears' Annual* and *The Royal Magazine* enabled him to earn a modest living and the family moved to Botley in Buckinghamshire. There Robinson concentrated on watercolour for magazine and commercial work, as well as for sale to collectors. His pictures had been exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition on a number of occasions starting in 1898, and he now exhibited at the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours. He was elected a member of the RI for Painters in Water Colours in 1932, which must have given him great pleasure, especially given his lack of formal training.

At family gatherings it was always Charles who took the lead in any entertainments, and he was, with his brothers, a founder member of an informal social club, the Frothfinders Federation, taking a leading role in its activities. Like his brother Will, he was a member of the London Sketch Club and of The Savage Club, serving as President of the former in 1926 and 1927. It therefore came as a great shock to his family and friends that one who was so full of life should be suddenly taken ill and die in the summer of 1937 at the age of 67. In his spare time he had loved to build model ships, and left a model of a galleon unfinished at his death.

© 2011, Geoffrey Beare

Geoffrey Beare is a freelance writer and researcher in the history of book illustration. He is chairman of the Imaginative Book Illustration Society and a

trustee of the William Heath Robinson Trust. He is author of *The Art of William Heath Robinson*, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003, and has published a biography of Alice B. Woodward. His most recent research, on the children's stories and illustrations of Edith Farmiloe, was published in *Studies in Illustration* (45:2010).

### **Selected Publications with Illustrations by Charles Robinson**

- Aesop's Fables*. London: J. M. Dent, 1895.
- Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden*. London: Heinemann, 1911.
- Canton, William (editor). *The True Annals of Fairyland: The Reign of King Herla*. London: J. M. Dent, 1900.
- Field, Eugene. *Lullaby Land*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1897.
- France, Anatole. *Bee, Princess of the Dwarfs*. London: J. M. Dent, 1912.
- Jerrold, Walter (editor). *The Big Book of Nursery Rhymes*. London: Blackie & Son, 1903.
- . *The Big Book of Fairy Tales*. London: Blackie & Son, 1911.
- . *The Big Book of Fables*. London: Blackie & Son, 1912.
- Macgregor, Barrington. *King Longbeard*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1898.
- Robinson, Charles (as Awfly Wierdly). *Christmas Dreams*. London: Marcus Ward, 1896.
- Setoun, Gabriel. *The Child World*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1896.
- The Songs and Sonnets of William Shakespeare*. London: Duckworth, 1915.
- Sharp, Evelyn. *The Child's Christmas*. London: Blackie & Son, 1906.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Child's Garden of Verses*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1895.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*. London: Duckworth, 1913.

### **Selected Publications about Charles Robinson**

- E.B.S. "A New Book Illustrator: Charles Robinson." *The Studio* Vol 5 (1895): 146-50.
- de Freitas, Leo. *Charles Robinson*. London: Academy Editions, 1976.
- "Review of the *Macmillan Reader*." *The Studio*, Vol 5 (1895): pix.
- Salaman, Malcolm. "Charles Robinson, Book Illustrator." *The Studio* Vol 66 (1915): 176-185.