

Heath Robinson

There are few artists whose name has passed into the language, but there it is in Chambers' Dictionary:

Heath-Robinson: adj used to describe an over-ingenious, ridiculously complicated or elaborate mechanical contrivance.

The delight given by Heath Robinson's absurd contrivances for doing such things as testing mistletoe for its kiss-permitting properties, overcoming the difficulties of conveying green peas to the mouth, or trying the nerve of a promising young student at the Royal College of Steeplejacks, has been known and relished by the British public for a century now. It isn't just the preposterous complexity, which for all its nonsensical elaboration looks as if it might just work, it's the gorgeous amateurishness of the actual objects themselves: the wheels made of two rough semi-circles of wood nailed together, the drive-belts consisting of several lengths of differently-sized string tied with large lumpy knots, the struts formed from several pieces of gnarled and twisty wood laboriously lashed together ... It's immediately recognizable, and immensely lovable.

Lovable, because the quality most lasting of all in his work is the charm. These solemn, earnest men with their frock coats and their top hats, and all the other members of the Heath Robinson repertory company, don't know they're being ridiculous. They are convinced that they're being entirely rational and clever and up-to-date. They're silly and harmless and delightful, because they don't realize that they're any of those things.

It's a world that doesn't exist any more, because it's entirely mechanical. You can read how it works by looking at it and tracing this lever and that pulley and this handle and seeing what happens when they move. Our world isn't mechanical any more, and it's lost a lot of charm in the process of becoming digital. Who knows how a mobile phone works? You press this button or touch that screen, but what happens inside? No-one knows, or no-one we know knows. And if it breaks you have to throw it away, because you can't mend it by tying a piece of string around it.

But the world was like Heath Robinson's drawings once. And there's a lot of social observation in them: the very *moderne* dining table and chairs, all made of one length of twisted chromium-covered steel tube; and all the ingenious space-saving devices for people living in small houses or flats, or for preventing their dancing to the broadcast music of the Savoy Orpheans from annoying the people downstairs – this was an inter-war world in which new ways of living were coming about, and were felt to be very up-to-date, but which one had to get accustomed to. But given the mild, earnest, energetic decency of the people, it would all work somehow.

Because there's no wickedness in Heath Robinson's world. There's no evil, no greed, no selfishness. As Evelyn Waugh said of the work of P. G. Wodehouse, it's prelapsarian: there has been no Fall of Man in this universe. These suburban amateur inventors and top-hatted officials may not live in Blandings Castle or belong to the Drones Club, but they are as innocent of sin as Bertie Wooster.

Servants, incidentally, are an interesting point of contrast between Wodehouse and Heath Robinson. In Wodehouse all the work is done by servants, and consequently isn't thought about at all. In Heath Robinson, work is thought about a lot. There are a few servants, usually a harassed-looking housemaid pressed into service to hand the plates around during dinner, but more often than not the food, the drink, the soda syphon, the plates (a choice of hot or cold) are delivered by a vast and elaborate system of pulleys, weights, and levers, while in the corner the cat sits on top of a bellows, thus providing enough pressure to squirt some milk into her bowl. All the work is done by his machinery, which is an indication either that Heath Robinson is more up-to-date than Wodehouse, or (more likely) that the people he depicts are from a different social class, one not quite so much at home with servants, perhaps, or one that found it harder to pay wages than to construct machinery. Certainly these people don't live in Blandings Castle. Their homes are more modest than that – hence all the space-saving devices, the chicken farm suspended over the drawing room, the folding garden on its extendable balcony, the hatchways through which to cook your bacon and eggs without getting out of bed.

Once Heath Robinson had found his particular way of expressing his particular vision, there was no need to do anything else. He could have carried

on doing it for ever. But he did have a different side. I have a copy of *Don Quixote* with his illustrations – fantastical, to be sure, as befits the story, but with a delicate *fin-de-siècle* romanticism. The tales of Hans Christian Andersen, *The Water Babies*, *The Arabian Nights* – there was a side of his nature that responded to a different sort of fantasy, but the public taste for that didn't last as long as the enthusiasm for his absurd contraptions.

And now there is to be a museum dedicated to his work. I'm delighted to hear it. In 1934 the Ideal Home Exhibition at Olympia displayed a house called 'The Gadgets', with models of half-size people living in a half-size house fitted with every contraption they could find space for. It would be delightful to see something like that. But whatever we shall see in this museum, Heath Robinson deserves every kind of applause we can give him. The words 'National Treasure' are now applied to any vaguely talented man or woman who reaches pensionable age. We need something better than that to praise Heath Robinson: 'Immortal Contraptioneer', or 'Mighty Commander of the Preposterous', or 'Grand High Celestial Mechanic of Absurdity'.

I heartily support the Heath Robinson Museum, and I wish it all the success it deserves for celebrating the memory of this great man.

Philip Pullman

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