

Roberta



‘The Youngest Magician in the World’

presented by

Brian Lead

at the informal ‘Huddle of Historians’ during the I.B.M. British Ring Convention
in Eastbourne

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Introduction

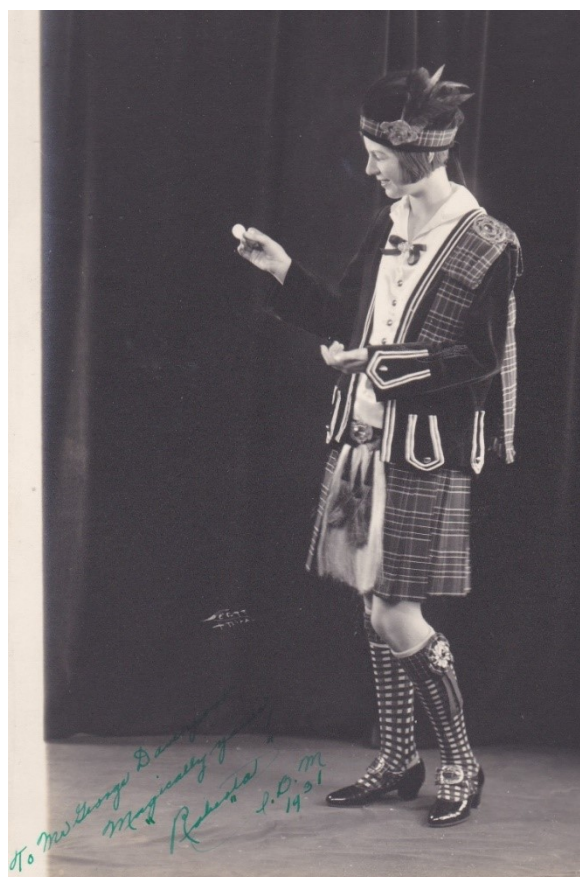
Traditionally, an informal 'Huddle of Historians' is convened as a sort of fringe event at the British Ring convention. In 2019, one such group assembled one evening in the opulent surroundings of the Grand Hotel in Eastbourne, each bringing along an item of interest for discussion. I had a photograph which came into my possession some years ago, showing a female of indeterminable age dressed in full Scottish regalia and apparently manipulating coins. It is signed 'To George Davenport – magically yours, Roberta', with some initials and the year 1931 added.

Roberta in Britain

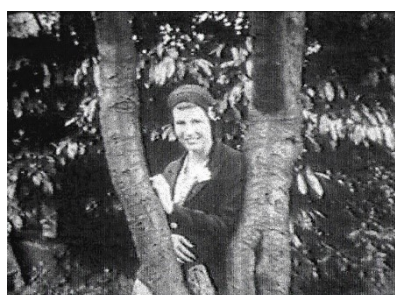
At first, I had read the initials as I.O.M., thinking they may refer to the Isle of Man where Sir Alexander Cannon was presenting regular shows in his Enchanted Hall at Laureston Mansion House during the 1930s. Alternatively, someone suggested that the initials could stand for the Institute of Magicians . . . but it was not until James Freedman applied a magnifying glass to the problem that the letters were, in fact, revealed to be 'I.B.M.' That middle letter was a fat and rounded capital **B**.

Eddie Dawes recalled that a young Roberta Byron had come over from the USA to appear at the first British Ring convention, held in Cheltenham in 1931. This was obviously her, personalising a photograph to George Davenport who had performed with her on the Saturday night gala show held in the Town Hall. Lewis Davenport filmed the delegates in the gardens of the Belle Vue Hotel.

Billed as 'the youngest magician in the world', Roberta was born in Philadelphia on February 13th, 1917, and began her performing career in 1928, when she was eleven.



Publicity photograph of Roberta in the 'Scotsman's Dream' act, signed to Mr George Davenport.



These stills are from the film of the 1931 convention taken by the Davenport family. From left to right they show Roberta posing with a tree, Roberta and Marion with Mr and Mrs Byron, and George Davenport producing a coin from around Roberta's head.

According to Roy Field, the author of *Linking Britain* (the history of the British Ring) Roberta's was one of the two acts which stood out – not only because she was by far the youngest performer at the age of fourteen, or because she was female or the furthest travelled. For the curious, the other outstanding act was that of Leo and Miss Tree, which had been seen on the 'Royal Command' Variety Show in 1925. Leo mentally transferred to his attractive companion titles of popular songs suggested secretly by members of the audience, and Miss Tree played them immediately on the piano.

Roy comments: 'Roberta performed cleverly with billiard balls, handkerchiefs, flower productions and the linking rings, assisted by her even younger sister, Marion. She was so popular that she was made the first Honorary Member of the British Ring, and also had the distinction of being the first of many American magicians to have appeared at British Ring conventions.' Roy states that Roberta was last seen performing in 1945, but Gary Frank, her American biographer, suggests 1940, the year of her marriage when she was still only 23.

The Story of Roberta and her sister Marion

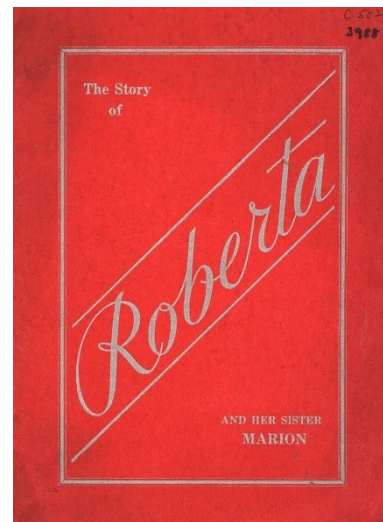
The ever-reliable David Hibberd, archivist of The Magic Circle, promised to investigate further, and soon discovered a publicity brochure: 'The Story of Roberta and her Sister Marion'. Between its plain red covers are four full-page photographs and four pages of text.

According to this, when Roberta came over in 1931 with Marion and her parents, she also visited Scotland and France, returning with a silver-tipped wand from the Scottish Conjurers' Association and a gold medal from the Magicians' Club. This was personally presented by Will Goldston, who introduced her as 'the one and only Roberta.'

One of her publicity shots showed her with a young man and another performer dressed in eighteenth century period costume. I was initially unable to identify either of her unnamed companions, but by happy coincidence I was recently given a scrapbook which had belonged to the late Ernest Ainley – a



member of the I.B.M. for fifty years. Lo and behold, the same image had been cut out and stuck in his book, with the caption 'Miss Roberto (sic), Robert Harbin and Ed Proudlock' added by hand. A closer look at the picture revealed that the head-and-shoulders photograph was, indeed, of a young Robert Harbin, creator of the iconic Zig Zag Girl among many other ingenious inventions. Billed as 'Ned Williams – the Boy Magician from South Africa', he had gone to London at the age of twenty and worked as a demonstrator in the Toy Dept. of Gamage's. Eight years older than Roberta, Robert/Ned would have been in his early twenties when she appeared in England. Edward Proudlock, born in Yorkshire in 1882, was a popular performer in the 1920s and 1930s. This image of him in eighteenth century court dress was also used in his publicity brochure *Magic Deluxe*.



It is recorded that luminaries such as Harry Blackstone, Al Baker, Jean Hugard, Burling Hull, The Great Raymond, T. Nelson Downs, Jack Gwynne, Walter B. Gibson and John Northern Hilliard came to see Roberta performing in her own private theatre, leaving autographed photographs to adorn its walls. Howard Thurston introduced her to a wider public through the medium of radio, pronouncing her 'a real artist.'

Roberta presented four distinct routines, all performed silently to music and in appropriate costume. The *Scotsman's Dream* featured the deft manipulation of coins, coming 'from here, there and everywhere' and culminating in a cascade of silver pouring from her hands.

Her *Billiard Ball Act* involved the production of five solid balls, leading to colour changes covering 'all the colours of the rainbow' and the final transformation of the balls into large silk handkerchiefs in corresponding colours.

Miracle was Roberta's version of the growth of a seed into a bush of real roses, cut and distributed among the audience. The accompanying photograph (taken by the press on the British visit) suggests that this was a self-working apparatus effect, achieved by means of a tube.

For the classic *Chinese Linking Rings* routine Roberta is described as using five heavy ten-inch rings, which linked, unlinked, formed designs and then one long chain before falling separately onto the stage. It concluded with the production of a giant dragon silk and the sudden appearance of streaming ribbons, confetti and Chinese parasols.

Subsequently, Roberta Byron married a judge, worked as a teacher and had four children. She was active in local politics, and although she never took to the stage as a magician again, she did appear in amateur dramatic performances. She died in March 2002, at the age of 85.



Press photograph taken during Roberta's visit to Britain.

Acknowledgements

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