

Witty voice, alert eye lead path through gold-rush days

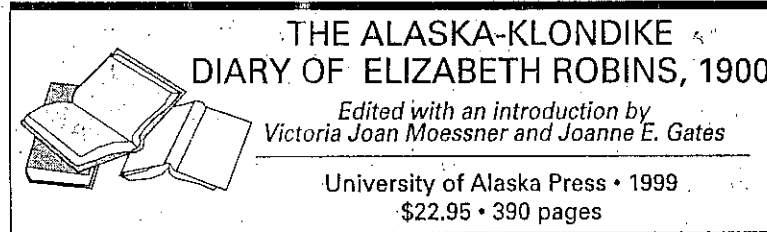
By SHERRY SIMPSON

During the gold rush, people came north for all sorts of reasons: to find riches, adventure, a new life. Actress Elizabeth Robins traveled to Alaska to rescue her brother Raymond.

By the time she journeyed to Nome, this extraordinary woman had made a name for herself as a minor actress in America and in England. She also wrote plays, short stories and novels. For years she had been out of touch with her brothers Raymond and Saxton, who had gone to Dawson but had failed to strike it rich.

After Elizabeth received a letter from Raymond in 1899 describing his religious conversion and his plan to work in the ministry in Nome, she decided to seek her brothers out. She especially was determined to save Raymond from being saved, and she wanted to know him better.

This diary is probably her work of greatest interest to contemporary readers. The editors describe the journal as the "most engaging, witty and



readable available that documents the Alaska and Yukon territory of 1900." It is all that, and more.

Robins' talent lies in her ability to portray people and situations she encounters in rich narrative scenes. Unlike those of us who might jot down a few telegraphic scribbles, Robins uses dialogue, anecdotes and observations to enlarge her entries into true storytelling. She opens at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York as she attempts to arrange her trip. Readers may find the long prelude to her real journey a bit slow, but it is interesting to see what efforts a single woman needed to take before embarking across the continent.

From the boat trip to Nome, through her departure by way of Dawson, Robins portrays an era that may seem

unfamiliar in its particulars. Far from the romanticized version we've grown accustomed to, we also see the daily travails and drudgery of gold camps. She is especially adept at drawing portraits of people.

Her keen eye makes this possible, as does her sense of humor. In describing the rough but kindly men traveling north, she mentions that many eat with their knives but one thoughtful man helping himself to butter was careful to lick his knife before serving himself. She visits Nome saloons and describes how "a woman with dyed hair was singing furiously in a terrible voice and when she got to the screaming high note the miners geyed her." She finds the spectacle of saloons and prostitutes sadder than the "open honest wretchedness of the beach."

There are minor excitements here—frays involving lot jumpers, a couple of murders, trips to outlying gold camps. Robins sketches the niceties that somehow survive the roughness of this unusual life, including her determined efforts to take afternoon tea. She also unwittingly conveys many of the era's social attitudes in her snobberies and occasional racist references.

The central drama here is her reunion with Raymond, who is running a beleaguered church in Nome and has become known as a kind, righteous and helpful young man in a place seething with schemes, corruption and harshness. Elizabeth agonizes over the way her brother spends himself on improving conditions, and she is concerned that he plans to marry a young woman who seems unsuitable. Many entries concern Elizabeth's subtle attempts to persuade Raymond to leave Nome with her.

Her struggle to imagine a life for herself and Raymond in the future is moving. At one point she writes:

"So I begin to think of my books, of History and Languages, of the art of writing of the interest of watching the great world and its movement of Elizabeth Robins too, as a creature apart from another life. I am not a helpless person. I have a hundred resources, but what are they against one heartache!"

Whether she succeeds in wooing Raymond away from Nome provides sufficient tension that it seems unfair to reveal the twists of fate that intervene at the end of this narrative. Thanks to the introduction and a helpful chronology, readers know that Raymond and Elizabeth eventually spend much of their later lives involved in important social and political issues.

This journal is wonderful all on its own, though. It provides a window into one of the North's most compelling periods. And it beautifully portrays the longings of the human heart to find adventure, fortune, companionship and especially love.

Sherry Simpson is an award-winning writer who teaches journalism at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

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