

Queen Silver:

AN UNSUNG HERO OF FREE SPEECH, FREETHOUGHT, AND SCIENCE

The Godless Girl

Wendy McElroy

Queen Silver was born in 1910, and, by the time she was eight, she was well-known as a lecturer on science and freethought. Her reputation was cemented in Los Angeles in 1919 when she spoke on six occasions to packed houses on science subjects from Darwin to Einstein's Theory of Relativity. She went on to publish the Queen Silver Magazine, which had a circulation of about 5,000, and became the inspiration for the Cecil B. DeMille movie *The Godless Girl*, which was based on her founding of the Junior Atheist League at Hollywood High in the 1920s.

Queen's freethinking mother, Grace Verne Silver, was instrumental in her daughter's work. When the two faced harassment after World War I because of their leftist sympathies, Queen turned to conventional work as a stenographer to support them. She kept her former activism hidden but not forgotten, and toward the end of her life turned over her papers to Center for Inquiry Libraries. Wendy McElroy has written a book based on her interviews with Queen and her documents, *Queen Silver: The Godless Girl* (Prometheus Books, 1999), from which the following excerpt is taken.—Eds.

Until the late twenties, the city of Los Angeles had a "free speech zone" that extended between 1st and 2nd Avenue on Los Angeles Street. Along this stretch, speakers were permitted to set up soapboxes and audiences were allowed to gather in an atmosphere relatively free from interference by police. It was a favorite outdoor auditorium for evangelists and radicals of all causes. Much later in life, Queen Silver gave a sense of how the free speech zone in Los Angeles had evolved:

A woman named Dorothy Johns in 1908 along with three other women was arrested for using the streets of L. A. to speak on freethought since preachers were allowed to freely speak on religion. Thirty-five men were also arrested. The prisoners were all acquitted. Channing Severance wrote: "The Socialists and Freethinkers of Los Angeles have won a notable victory for free speech—that is, the right to speak unmolested on the street—and religious ranters no longer enjoy a monopoly given them by pinheaded officials afflicted with the idea that only believers in the Christian superstition have any rights under a secular government."

Queen also reminisced about her own experiences as a lecturer in Wendy McElroy's latest book is *The Reasonable Woman*. She is a FREE INQUIRY contributing editor.

the free speech zone:

By the time mother and I arrived in Los Angeles, the free speech zone was well established. With the exception of people throwing rocks occasionally and of a truck that purposefully drove into a meeting one night killing two people and injuring several—(mother jumped off the soapbox just in time to avoid injury)—there were no incidents. That is, as far as the law was involved, we had no problems, except that my mother did get arrested once during a speech.

She read a clipping out of the newspaper which said that the army camp near Riverside had issued a command that people should not kiss each other publicly on the streets of Riverside. The army people explained that they needed to protect the morals of the soldiers who were stationed at the camp. So my mother said that if these soldiers hadn't all had good Christian upbringings, they wouldn't need someone to pass a law to protect their morals. For that she got taken off on the charge of disturbing the peace.

Several photographs exist of Queen as a child lecturer, standing on a table top in the open air of Los Angeles Street. In one, Queen—who was always diminutive—is a tiny seven-year-old, poised on a soap box with arms spread wide open in front of a fascinated crowd of men. In another, her back is to the camera, her hands rest demurely by her side, and there is no podium to hold any notes because she is speaking extemporaneously. To one side of Queen and slightly closer to the camera, with her face included downward, Grace is seated and seems to be following Queen's speech from a sheath of papers in her lap. Again, a few dozen men have gathered and seem to be listening intently. How large the audience actually was in either case cannot be ascertained as the photograph captures only a segment of the scene.

One photograph of Queen would be widely reproduced by other periodicals: an eight-year-old Queen, with a huge soft bow gathering her hair loosely back, is raptly studying a book reported to be Haeckel's scientific treatise, *Natural History of Creation*. The photograph is clearly posed, but very effective nevertheless. Queen's doll-like face, with apparently rouged lips, inclines slightly downward toward an opened book that seems too large for her hands. Light spills through a window, backlighting her in an almost ethereal manner. Indeed, from the soft focus, the picture may well have been shot through gauze. It is no wonder that this was the photograph Queen chose to have printed on a promotional card, even when she was approaching her teenage years.

One aspect of the photo that was probably not staged was the choice of reading matter. The area of human study that drew the young Queen's most rapt attention was science. She expressed a special fondness for Haeckel, Darwin, and Huxley. As a result of her precocious reading and her soapbox lectures on evolution, the London Society of Social Science asked the eight-and-a-half-year-old to deliver

six lectures at a large hall in Los Angeles. The hour-and-a-half lectures were to be delivered on successive Sunday evenings. The announced titles were: "Darwin's Theory of Evolution," "From Star Dust to Man," "Human Nature in the Animal World," "Human Nature in the Plant World," "The Conquest of Mexico by Cortez," and "The Incas of Old Peru."

The Los Angeles Record of December 24, 1919—the day before Christmas—had enthused:

Eight-Year Old Girl to Lecture on Darwinism. Queen is a little actress as well as lecturer and is going into pictures in emotional character work, she says. She has had considerable encouragement from D.W. Griffith and the Goldwyn studios.

A good share of Sunday night's address will be extemporaneously delivered. She has already traveled 50,000 miles in work on the stage and lecture platform. For pleasure she reads Roman and Greek history and geology. Algebra and geometry, she says, as "easy" subjects. . . .

The lecture series changed Queen's life. Newspapers rushed to exclaim over the girl wonder. And publicity did not die with the passage of months. The enduring attention Queen garnered can be partially explained by what could be called "good marketing." For example, at the age of ten, when the notoriety from the original lecture series might well have been dying down, Queen made a strategic choice. How much it was guided by Grace is not known. The choice: Queen offered an interpretation of the not-yet-published, but greatly anticipated, theory of relativity by Albert Einstein. Einstein's revolutionary theory was the talk of the day, in and outside of the scientific world. And many scientists were at a loss to know how to evaluate it.

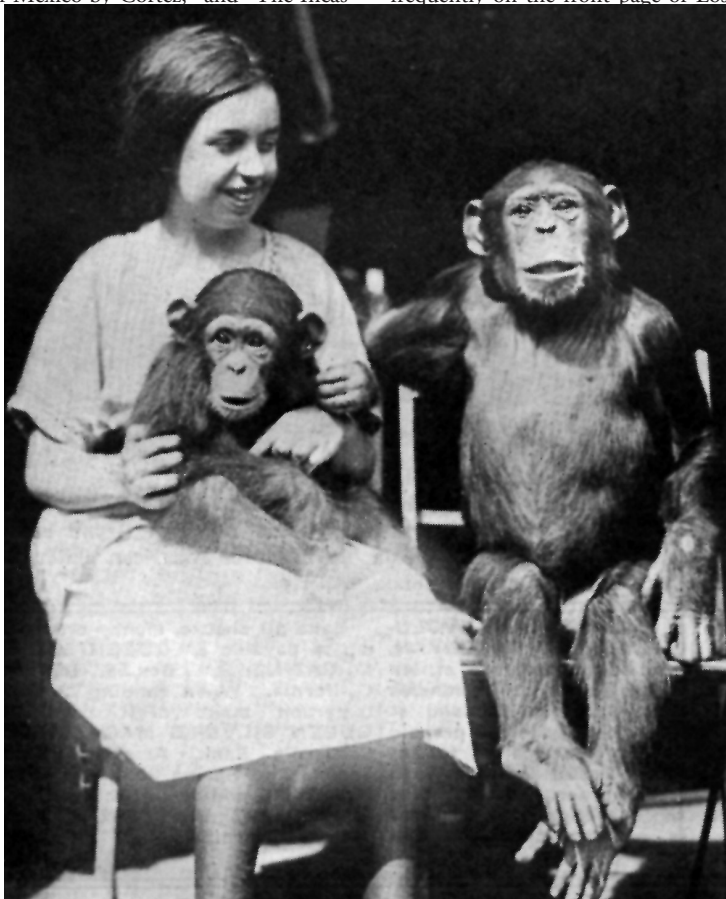
By offering a child's-eye-view of relativity, Queen shared in the scientific limelight being shone upon Albert Einstein. The famed botanist Luther Burbank expressed enthusiasm over her interpretation. The veteran and venerated freethought author William Smith Bryan proclaimed, "I never understood what Einstein meant by Relativity until I read her lecture on that subject. Possibly Einstein understood what he meant himself, but if he had employed Queen Silver to put his ideas into words, the world would have understood him better."

The Los Angeles Record of July 6, 1921, announced in page-two headlines: "Girl, 10, Explains Einstein. She Elucidates Relativity." The headline was followed immediately by an Editor's Note. "Queen Silver, 10-year-old Hollywood girl, whose only school has been the Los Angeles public library, has written an article on Einstein's theory of relativity for Record readers."

In such a flamboyant and print-worthy manner did Queen maintain her status as a child sensation, so that even foreign language publications, from Yiddish to Esperanto, reprinted excerpts of her lectures along with glowing commentary. Queen also continued to land frequently on the front page of Los Angeles newspapers, such as the

Sunday edition of Los Angeles Examiner, October 15, 1922, whose headline declared, "Girl, Age 12, Expounds Wisdom of Centuries as Savants Marvel."

Over a period of three years, Queen repeatedly delivered the six lectures to large and eager audiences, adding several new topics to her repertoire. For example, she developed lectures entitled "The Pioneers of Freethought," "Evolution of Brain Power," and "Voltaire and the Fall of the Bastille." It was not unusual for hundreds of people to throng into halls for her lectures, with hundreds more being turned away at the door. On November 21, 1923, the editorial page of the Bakersfield Morning Echo boasted the headline: "A Wonderful Child." The editor declared, "When it is advertised that she [Queen] is to speak in a schoolhouse or other public building it is almost impossible to find



From the cover of Queen Silver's 1925 pamphlet "Evolution from Monkey to Bryan."

standing room." fi