

MORE HOT AIR

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An e-mail from Jeff Grant calls into question my conclusion that the solution to the riddle under discussion is “A Hot Air Balloon.” Using the website Google Books, he found that it appeared in the 1782 edition of *The Ladies’ Diary or Women’s Almanac*, where its author is identified as Miss Eliza Hurst. It appeared again in the October 6, 1783 edition of *The Weekly Entertainer*, another British publication, this time without an author given.

The 1782 edition of *The Ladies’ Diary* is included in the book published in 2010, *Collection of English Almanacs for the years 1702-1835*. This work is copyrighted, and Google allows you to read only a snippet (the first two lines) of the riddle. The book apparently does not include the 1783 almanac. One can read all of the 1783 *Weekly Entertainer* on Google Books, and neither Jeff nor I could find an answer to the riddle either for the rest of 1783 or in all of 1784.

If only Jeff hadn’t found that 1782 publication! The year 1783 exploded with ballooning experiments. In June of that year the Montgolfier brothers sent up at Annonay, France an unoccupied, so-called fire balloon believing that it was the smoke that caused the craft to rise. On August 23 in Paris the Robert brothers and Professor J. A. Charles sent up the first gas-powered (hydrogen) balloon. On September 19 Joseph Montgolfier launched a trial balloon containing a sheep, a cock and a duck. All survived, and only the cock suffered an injury, but that was when he was kicked by the sheep before lift-off. On October 15 Jean François Pilatre de Rozier went so far as to leave the ground in a balloon still tethered to earth, but a month later, on November 21, he did away with the tether. Meanwhile in London Count Francesco Zambecari sent up a balloon on November 4. The final ballooning event of the year was on December 1 when Professor Charles made an ascent in a gas balloon. All of these events attracted huge crowds, including royalty, and it would be rather likely for someone to compose a riddle on the subject. Is it only coincidence that the riddle subsequently appeared in *Dickson’s Balloon Almanac*?

But that 1782 publication puzzles us. Presumably the almanac was written and published in 1781 when nothing obvious was going on. The first recorded experiment by the Montgolfier brothers was not until September 1782 at Avignon. Were they or others actually experimenting earlier? Was news of their experiments widely circulated?

The answers to the riddles, then called enigmas, in *The Ladies’ Diary* were usually given the following year. The only library that Google Books knows which has a copy of the 1783 edition is at the University of Cambridge in England. Would one of WORDWAYS’ English subscribers like to take a trip to Cambridge? I believe that it is only there that we can find out the intended answer to this pesky riddle?