Robert Douglas-Fairhurst

THE STORY OF ALICE

Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland

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Marvelling at her bizarre experiences in Wonderland, Alice declares that ‘There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought!’ This is among Lewis Carroll’s many playful nudges to his readers, for we have in our hands the very volume that Alice thought she deserved. What Carroll could not have guessed when *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was published 150 years ago is that the forceful, inquisitive little girl who meets the White Rabbit, the Duchess, or the Cheshire Cat would turn out to have extraordinary staying power. After he had followed the unexpected success of Alice’s first appearance with the publication in 1872 of *Through the Looking-Glass*, *and What Alice Found There*, his small heroine acquired a life of her own. She takes a multitude of forms – cartoons, paintings, films, plays, and hundreds of literary disguises. Though these conundrums and unsettling transformations reflect adult preoccupations, she maintains a sturdy presence of her own, embodying childish sanity in a world of crazy grown-ups. With her fearless curiosity and uncertain temper, Carroll’s Alice was the first of a generation of imagined children who were more than pasteboard representatives of pious ideals.

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst does not claim to have written a biography of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the man who became Lewis Carroll and created Wonderland. Nor is he describing the life of Alice Liddell, who left her fictional idiosyncrasies behind to become the wealthy Mrs Hargreaves, an entirely conventional wife and mother. He is telling the ‘story of Alice’, a tale that emerges from the unpredictable confluence between the real little girl, Dodgson’s inventive life as a writer and photographer, and a variety of contexts that allowed Alice to supply some of the defining images of her age. This is an approach that provides a good fit for Douglas-Fairhurst’s preferred methods, allowing him to move freely between passages exploring cultural history (the development of photography, the Victorian seaside, the evolution of writing for children) and the events in the lives of Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell, or the irreproachable Mrs Hargreaves. The result is an episodic account, with a shifting focus that is in keeping with its diverse themes. Other biographies have struggled with a paucity of material. As a writer, Charles Dodgson was a brilliant pioneer, but as a mathematical don in Christ Church, he was conservative and self-effacing. Apart from a single and uncharacteristically bold trip to Moscow, he was content to follow the rhythms of the academic year, devoting a good deal of energy to the meticulous stewardship of the common room in his later life. Douglas-Fairhurst follows the standard scholarly practice of referring to Dodgson by his pseudonym ‘Lewis Carroll’ throughout, tacitly accepting that Carroll is the man who matters, not the dull and retiring Dodgson. And yet they are the same character, just as the decorous Alice Liddell is also the defiant Alice who kicks the hapless lizard Bill out of the White Rabbit’s chimney, and fiercely resists any attempt at bullying by the Queen of Hearts:

‘Hold your tongue!’ said the Queen, turning purple.

‘I won’t!’ said Alice.

The story that Douglas-Fairhurst wants to tell has to do with multiple identities – Charles Dodgson, churchman and don; Lewis Carroll, writer and rebel; Alice Liddell, the carefully-brought up daughter of the Dean of Christ Church, and finally the indomitable Alice that they created between them, whose clear questioning voice refuses to be muffled by layers of analysis or familiarity. ‘Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!’

Twenty years separated Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell. Carroll was born as the eldest son in a family of eleven children in 1832, and spent his early years in Daresbury parsonage in Cheshire, where his father was a curate. The household seems to have been isolated, but Carroll throve in this community of children, and never forgot the ingenious games he shared with his siblings. Educated by his parents for the first twelve years of his life, he was later sent to Rugby, where he was an unhappy but accomplished pupil. He was exceptionally intelligent, disciplined, and genuinely interested in his mathematical studies, a combination that led to further academic success in his undergraduate years at Oxford’s Christ Church, his father’s college. His subsequent election to a fellowship (or studentship, as it was called) in the college was smooth, and he passed the rest of his career among the imposing quadrangles of Christ Church. Ordination was a condition of his fellowship, and though Carroll never progressed beyond the position of a deacon in the Anglican church, his Christian faith was strong throughout his life. As a young man, Carroll must have seemed destined for a placidly anonymous existence. But there were soon signs that he was not wholly satisfied with the ordered routines of an Oxford don. He continued to publish poems and stories alongside mathematical treatises, and he became an early enthusiast for photography, which was then a new and technically demanding pastime. Carroll’s sharp eye for what would make a striking composition, together with his patient mastery of the wet collodion process, soon brought impressive results. He produced around three thousand images before he gave the work up in 1880.

Many of these photographs represented young children, especially girls. This was an interest that helped to bring him into contact with the three pretty daughters of the Dean and his wife, for they were evidently ideal subjects for his camera. Carroll’s pictures of Alice, especially the sultry and much-reproduced ‘The Beggar Maid’, are now among the most celebrated of all Victorian photographs. Such images have shadowed his activities with suspicion, during his lifetime and since. Was his liking for these children a innocuously affectionate partiality, or were his motives those of a predatory paedophile? Douglas-Fairhurst treats this troubling and persistent question with careful balance. Clearly, Liddell’s many ‘child-friends’ became the centre of his emotional life. There is nothing to suggest that he ever established anything approaching a romantic partnership with an adult, male or female. It is equally true that there is no evidence that he pursued the girls with anything other than his camera, or with jocular letters. To modern eyes, the fact remains that his interest is either distasteful or offensive, particularly when it extended to taking photographs of nude children. After Savile and the scandals that have followed, we are not prepared to take a tolerant view of such behavior. Middle-class Victorians, as Douglas-Fairhurst points out, often saw things differently. They were inclined to associate children, unclothed or not, with purity rather than forbidden pleasures. It may well be that Carroll’s interest was sentimental rather than sexual, arising from an obscure mixture of feelings that can never now be fully understood. Douglas-Fairhurst points to a telling parallel with Charles Dickens, who also fetishized the innocence of little girls. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens surrounded Little Nell, the most virtuous of his child heroines, with wild and threatening grotesques in a way that might be compared with the menacing situations that Alice faces in Wonderland.

What is certain is that Carroll was attracted by the candour and liveliness of children, especially girls, as a welcome alternative to the mundane professional relationships that his lifelong stammer and partial deafness must have made burdensome to him. The male undergraduates of Christ Church could provide no such comfort. They were rowdy and disengaged, and it was rare to find evidence of serious intellectual ambition in their work. Carroll did not warm to his students, who seemed to find him effeminate and ineffectual. A group of mocking undergraduates once signed a parody of his parodies ‘Louisa Caroline.’ Small girls are evidently less threatening than young men trying out their strength, but they are also incorrigibly irreverent. Reluctant to put up with tedious social proprieties, they like to hear stories of unexpected adventures, and to play imaginative games with friends, or toys, or even ideas. So did Carroll. The company of girls, who necessarily stood at some distance from the traditional values of a university that had no intention of admitting them as equals, offered a kind of escape that Carroll found irresistible. He was drawn to them in part because they seemed so removed from his own serious concerns, but also because he felt a kinship with their distinctive world.

Carroll could never share or wholly understand the vulnerabilities that came with a young girl’s social position, and there must have been some element of an imposition of power in the attachments that were so important to him. The fact that there is no surviving trace of what the Victorians would have called ‘impropriety’ does not mean that harm was avoided. The friendship between Carroll and Alice as a child seems to have been particularly intense. She was clearly somewhat embarrassed about her early life as Carroll’s companion and model in later years, though she was also proud of the association, and gathered a large collection of Alice memorabilia. More practically, the large sum of money she was able to raise from selling the original manuscript of ‘Alice’s Adventures Under Ground’ (as the story was first called) was a godsend when the family’s wealth began to run short after the Great War. She had married relatively late, at the age of twenty-eight, after choosing the safest of suitors as her husband. Her determined pursuit of blameless respectability (with the single unruly lapse of calling herself Lady Hargreaves, a title to which she had no legitimate claim) perhaps implies a wish to erase any trace of scandal lingering around the circumstances of her early literary celebrity. Or perhaps not. The staid Reginald Hargreaves proved himself to be a loyal and loving partner, and it could be that Alice simply fell in love with him. She may have struggled, as others did, with the sense that the enduring fame of her childish self denied her an entirely adult dignity. Christopher Robin Milne, or J.M. Barrie’s childhood friend Peter Llewellyn Davies, would have sympathized.

Alice never grew old in Wonderland – ‘that’ll be a comfort, one way – never to be an old woman’ – but the part of her identity that was caught there could not quite grow up, which was a less comforting thought. Some elements of Alice’s childhood may have been captured forever in Wonderland, or on the chess-board that existed through the looking glass, but the real Alice reached maturity with girls’ usual unrelenting speed. She was already ten years old on the afternoon of the famous boat trip to Godstow in 1862, where the story that was to become the germ of her fictional adventures first took shape, though her fictional namesake was just seven years old. A girl of ten is beginning to leave infancy behind. She was twelve when *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was published, and nineteen when *Through the Looking Glass* appeared. From the start, Lewis Carroll’s stories referred to an Alice who no longer existed. Their exuberance is always qualified by an underlying sense of transience. Carroll wrote to one of his young photographic models: ‘*Please* don’t grow any taller, if you can help it, till I’ve had time to photograph you again.’ But of course she could not help it, as he knew very well.

Carroll’s resolute conservatism often seems to amount to nothing more sophisticated than a steady wish to cheat time, and preserve the status quo. His instinct was to avoid any kind of agitation for change, though his emphatic views (he was, for instance, a convinced and eloquent anti-vivisectionist) sometimes broke through his inoffensive public persona. His work as a photographer might seem to stem from a comparable wish to stop time in its tracks, for little girls in photographs, like those in books, could not disappear into adulthood. They are arrested for a moment in time, though what is seized is a version of recalcitrant reality rather than a confected picture of sweetness. John Tenniel’s memorable illustrations mean that an Alice with dainty features, abundance of blonde hair, stiff clothes and tiny feet has become immediately identifiable to admirers all over the world. The Alice who meets our gaze in Carroll’s succeeding photographs is quite a different child. Her dark hair is cut in a short bob, and her feet, bare in ‘The Beggar Maid’, are bony and disconcertingly large – as far, in fact, from Tenniel’s discreet little shoes as it would be possible to conceive. Her characteristic expression is brooding and sullen. This is partly a consequence of long exposure time demanded by Carroll’s elaborate camera, for no-one, and especially not a child, can hold a convincing smile for long. Photographs of Victorian children often seem uncompromisingly gloomy to modern eyes, accustomed to beamingly cheerful portraits. Nevertheless, Carroll’s images of Alice seem especially severe, and certainly do not convey an impression of any wish to please on her part. In a photograph taken when she was eighteen, constrained by a tightly-fitting dress and displaying an impossibly complicated coiffure, her expression is positively hostile. It is hard to say whether this is anything more than a chance consequence of her pose, or an indication of generalized resentment at the restrictions of her life as she entered adulthood. But it may be that she was signalling a new independence from ties that had once compelled submission to the photographer’s fond gaze. A succession of child-friends, even this very particular friend, passed through Carroll’s life, and vanished as completely as the Cheshire Cat. His communications with the adult Alice were sparse and coldly formal, though his devotion to what she had once meant to him did not fade. He was always especially eager to make the acquaintance of girls who happened to be called Alice.

The child that Carroll had known was gone, but her fictional reflections remained. Despite his retiring nature, Carroll enjoyed the fame of his creation, and relished the freedom that an increasing income made possible. He was able to withdraw from some of his teaching duties, which must have been a relief, and devote his time to writing. He continued to publish mathematical papers, for he had never lost his love of Euclidean logic. But Alice provided many competing distractions. Douglas-Fairhurst gives a full account of Alice’s recurrent appearances in late Victorian culture, showing that she proved much more amenable to change than her creator. Her image was reproduced on biscuit tins (Carroll approved), toys, and puzzles, and she became a popular resource for advertisers. The Mock Turtle’s ‘Beau – ootiful Soo – oop!’ quickly became Pears’ ‘Beau – ootiful So – ap!’ She often turned up in satirical writing, for her tough-minded scepticism leant itself to the exploration of radical questions that Carroll habitually sidestepped. Alice was everywhere – elusive, perplexing, but always herself.

Though literary imitation and commercial manipulation kept Alice in the public eye, her real afterlife was invisible. It consisted of thousands and thousands of quiet connections, remembered or unremembered, between Carroll’s extraordinary texts and their numberless young readers. For many, Alice and her strange companions represent a first encounter with the challenges of speculative thought. Humpty Dumpty is not merely an accident-prone character from a nursery rhyme when Alice meets him:

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’

Many years have passed since I first read that barbed exchange, but I have not forgotten the tingle of surprise and excitement that it brought. I was used to stories that entertained through incident and character, but I had never come across the idea that they could also reflect on their own language. The consequences could be funny, but watching Carroll’s words twist this way and that, like Alice’s sinuous serpent neck, was exhilarating rather than just comical:

'I see nobody on the road,' said Alice.

'I only wish *I* had such eyes,' the King remarked in a fretful tone. 'To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too! Why, it's as much as *I* can do to see real people, by this light!'

Whatever Carroll’s motives as the ‘inveterate child-fancier’ he declared himself to be, his feelings for children extended to a respect for their intelligence that made it seem to him perfectly natural to include such word-play in their amusements. Rather than lecturing them, he takes their capacities seriously, and admits them into his authorial confidence. Alice is constantly scolded and harassed by the dictatorial creatures she meets on her travels, but her undaunted resistance never falters. Think carefully and precisely about every word that you hear, Carroll tells his young readers, and don’t be too ready to do as you are told. These are messages of lasting value.

Carroll, like the White King, did not always find it easy to see the real people he met on the road. Douglas-Fairhurst speculates as to whether he was lonely in his Christ Church rooms, with cupboards crammed with toys for other people’s children. If so, he did not complain. He died quietly in 1898, at the age of sixty-five, and was remembered as Lewis Carroll rather than Charles Dodgson. Alice Hargreaves died in 1934, her later years darkened by the loss of two of her three sons in the Great War, and the subsequent death of her devoted husband. She too may well have been lonely. Cuffnells, the grand house in the New Forest where she had lived in comfortable and apparently dependable affluence for many years, fell into disrepair. Like many such houses, it was demolished in the 1950s. The secure world that she and Carroll shared had disappeared. Alice, however, shows no sign of following, and her brisk good sense dismisses any temptation to subside into melancholy. 'Come, there's no use in crying like that!' said Alice to herself, rather sharply; 'I advise you to leave off this minute!' Douglas-Fairhurst’s sympathetic account reminds us that for all its dreamy evanescence the lasting point of Carroll’s Wonderland is to make us smile, and to make us think.