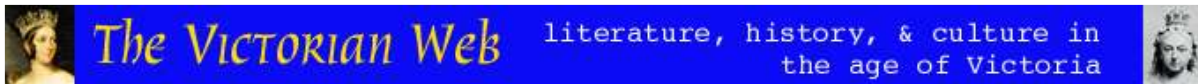


"Lewis Carroll": A Myth in the Making

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"Lewis Carroll is among the immortals of literature, C. L. Dodgson was soon forgotten, except by the very few." — Claude M. Blagden, Student of Christ Church from 1896.

"He was the last saint of this irreverent world; those who have surrendered the myths of Santa Claus, ... of Jehovah, hang their last remnants of mysticism on Lewis Carroll and will not allow themselves to examine him dispassionately" — Florence Becker Lennon



Charles Dodgson was born on January 27 1832. He lived his life and eventually died on January 14 1898.

"Lewis Carroll" was born on March 1 1856, and is still very much alive.

The hundred years of scholarship surrounding the author of Alice, has, I suggest, been largely concerned with the second rather than the first of these two incarnations. It has been devoted primarily to a potent mythology surrounding the name "Lewis Carroll", rather than the reality of the man, Dodgson. The evidence for this is everywhere, the reasons are only partly explicable in rational terms.

Charles Dodgson's family's incursive destruction of his papers immediately after his death, and their steady refusal to allow evidence to be made public, meant that the first hand biographical evidence remained almost non-existent until the second half of this present century. In a separate but ultimately linked development, a massive and almost irresistible myth surrounding the name "Lewis Carroll" had begun to develop even while Dodgson still lived. In the fallow space left by the lack of prima facie evidence, and the silence of his family, this myth grew in an unprecedented and powerful way. When early biographers wrote their studies of Lewis Carroll, lacking almost all first hand evidence, they had little choice but to fill their books with the stuff of this myth. And thus very early on it became dignified by an apparent scholastic pedigree. Later biographers took their lead and repeated these supposedly already verified "facts".

By the time any large amounts of prima facie data became available, the supposed "truth" about Charles Dodgson's life had become so well known, so embedded in the scholastic tradition that revision on any major scale seemed unnecessary, even impertinent. And evidence — sometimes extremely large and conclusive amounts of evidence — that suggested other possibilities tended to be marginalised and ignored. Thus, scholarship itself has become enmeshed in the evolution of the myth, in a way that may be unique in literary scholarship. Thus, the current biography of the author of Alice is in some of its most important respects, an invented biography of an invented name. It is more an extended essay on the unconscious power of myth and its place in the most civilised society, than it is any kind of full exposition of Dodgson's life.

I am not about to suggest by this that all modern biographers of Lewis Carroll are wilful story-tellers or incompetent fantasists. I am not about to suggest that they have no regard for the value of evidence. On the contrary, the last thirty years have seen something of a renaissance in Lewis Carroll scholarship. Research that ought to have been undertaken years before, has finally got under way. Volumes of his letters were published in the late 1970s. His unexpurgated diary is at present being prepared for publication.

But so far, the effect of this renaissance has only been to emphasise the degree to which the Carroll image exists beyond the reach of such evidence, in a curious quasi-religious realm of faith and intuition; the extent to which the entire Carroll phenomenon — popular culture and scholarship — manifests the psychology of iconicism, in its most bizarre and subliminal form. The image of the man presented by the biographies is so uniform and so confidently asserted that it gives the impression of arising from a firm and irrefutable basis. It seems inevitable that this degree of certainty, of unity, must have a considerable amount of good evidence at its source. But in fact something much stranger than straightforward biography is at work here.

Lewis Carroll's first biography appeared, officially sanctioned by the family, within months of his death in 1898. The image it presented of the man and his life has changed very little in the ensuing hundred years. By now, it is familiar. It is a portrait of a Victorian clergyman, shy and prim, and locked to some degree in perpetual childhood. A Janus who stumbled into genius through psychological fragmentation. A man who "had no life", who lived apart from the world and apart from normal human contact, who was monkish and chaste, and "died a virgin".

Perhaps above all else, it is a portrait of a man emotionally focused on pre-pubescent female children; a man who sought comfort and companionship exclusively through serial friendships with "little girls", and who almost invariably lost interest them when they reached puberty. His emotional life is presented as an ultimately sterile and lonely series of "repeated rejections", as the little ones grew up and inevitably left him behind. Since Freudian analysis plucked out the heart of his mystery sixty years ago, and found it cankered, this obsession has been seen by many as evidence of a repressed and deviant sexuality, and Carroll has been described as a man who struggled to master his "differing sexual appetites". To the popular press and the popular mind he is seen as a "paedophile". To distinguished scholars he is a man who "wanted the company of female children".

In the most high profile and respected of modern biography, Carroll is variously described as one "[whose] sexual energies sought unconventional outlets", who was "utterly depend[ent] upon the company and the affection of little girls". It is said with certainty that he was infamous for this passion even during his own lifetime, his photography of their bodies "perilously close to a kind of substitute for the sexual act". (Bakewell, xvii, 245, Cohen, 530). Even those who do not accept the sexual connotation, and set out to "defend" him against a supposed Freudian stigma — like Derek Hudson's 1954 biography, and Roger Lancelyn Green's preface to the edited *Diaries* of 1953 — make no attempt to question his supposed exclusive passion for the girl child. Their contention is merely that this obsession was largely sexless, because Lewis Carroll was too emotionally immature, too "simple hearted" to experience adult sexual desire for anyone or anything, or too prim to give any expression to it. For Hudson the very idea of Carroll as a sexual being was "delightfully absurd": He was a man who carried his childhood with him; the love that he understood and longed for was a protective love ... (Hudson, 100, 188). But the most academically impeccable of recent works, the one described more than once as "definitive", is the most outspoken about the nature and exclusivity of Lewis Carroll's obsession. Professor Morton Cohen's *Lewis Carroll: a Biography* entirely disowns the image of the asexual eternal child in favour of a picture of "a highly charged, fully grown male, with strong mature emotional responses" whose "emotions focus[ed] on children, not on adults". (193) It is a passionately believed-in portrait of a rigidly-controlled sexual deviant.

Whichever interpretation is presented, whether of controlled deviancy or of absolute asexuality, the axiom on which they both depend, indeed the axiom upon which the entire analysis of Carroll's life and literature depends, is the assumption that the girl-child was the single outlet for his emotional and creative energies in an otherwise lonely and isolated life. That she was the sole inspiration for his genius; that she inhabited the place in his heart, occupied in more normal lives by adult friends and by lovers. This belief, and its corollaries — his loneliness and his unassailable chastity — are the assumptions by which everything else about Carroll is evaluated.

The consensus seems to put the matter beyond question. It persuades us that the image of Carroll available in every biography is well-founded, and evidentially secure. The idea that so much respected tradition might be no more than a collation of powerful but baseless myths seems an outrageous and impudent suggestion. But nonetheless, it happens to be true.

The prima facie record, as it has emerged over the past fifty years, simply does not adequately support these images, or the present certainties of modern biography that have been built upon them. As this book will attempt to show, the very reverse is the case.

The man who emerges from the pages of Dodgson's diary and from his own extensive correspondence is not a "simple-hearted", naive dreamer of children, not a shy asexual recluse, loathing little boys, obsessed with little girls and unable to function in an adult world. The legend is true insofar that his preferred companions were always female, but he never hated boys or men, in fact he enjoyed several important men and boy-friendships in his life. And, despite frequent self-caricature as a "hermit", and despite its frequent repetition in biography, he was never any kind of a recluse. His diary makes it clear that he was almost addicted to company — particularly female company — and he never had any shortage of this in his life. In fact certain times were characterised for him by an almost obsessive socialising, hurrying about London visiting artists and writers and business associates, and his innumerable female friends, making more than half a dozen calls a day and fitting in theatre-visits and invitations to dine in between. Myth has just preferred to have it otherwise.

The same applies to an even greater extent to the most controversial and least understood area of Dodgson's life. Perhaps the defining emblem of his existence, whether seen as saintly uncle or as deviant; the belief that Lewis Carroll gave his love and attention exclusively to pre-pubescent girl children; that he abandoned all these friendships when the girls reached fourteen.

The reality of the life recorded in his diaries and his letters allows of no such glib and easy dismissal. It was

Dodgson who invented the now famous term "child-friend". But with typical elusiveness he chose to use it in a peculiarly personal, almost deliberately misleading way. For Dodgson a "child-friend" was any female of almost any age — at least under forty — with whom he enjoyed a relationship of a special kind of closeness. Some indeed were little girls, some began as such but grew up and were still "child-friends" at twenty or thirty; some were given the name even though their relationship with Dodgson began when they were young women. A little girl of ten and a married woman of thirty five, a child he met once at the beach and a woman he shared intimate exchanges with for twenty years or more, might equally be termed "child-friends" by Dodgson. Far from losing interest in girls when they reached puberty, at any one time a substantial proportion - anything from 30 to 90% — of his "child-friends" were already at or well beyond this watershed.

In defiance of everything that is presently believed, and beneath the misleading and infantilising appellation, his women-friendships were numerous. There were married women like Constance Burch, widows like Edith Shute and Sarah Blakemore, and single girls like Theo Heaphy, May Miller and "darling Isa" Bowman. These women were an integral part of his life, a potent source of companionship and comfort. They went on theatre trips with him, or dined *tête-à-tête* with him in his rooms, sometimes nursed him when he was ill, mended his clothes, shared his lodgings for extended periods. Some of them modelled for his camera, in what he called "outré" costume, long after leaving their childhood behind.

Many of these relationships were evidently very intimate and important to him; indeed he defied the conventions of his society in order to maintain them. Some of them were heavily sexualised, possessive and jealous, and certainly rumoured at the time to be sexual. He was gossiped about in consequence, sometimes vindictively, his social life, his photography all the source of powerful rumour. The gossip dogged and worried him. "Mrs. Grundy" became his personal Torquemada, tut-tutting at his heels as he walked his women-friends through polite society; whispering and hinting and rumour-mongering behind his back. His philosophy about such disapproval was barbed, but resigned.

You need not be shocked at my being spoken against. Anybody, who is spoken about at all, is sure to be spoken against by somebody. [Letters, II, 978]

he wrote to his morally-panicked younger sister, when talk about his relationship with a 25 year old woman threatened open scandal.

Beyond the bland and insincere mythology, his mature life was dominated by such scandals, about his attachment to married ladies, or unmarried women, prepared to surrender something of their reputation to be with him, in open defiance of the prevailing moral code. The reality of the author of Alice, his life and his literature, is of a rich and curious existence that, for a century or more, both biography and popular imagery have elected to ignore, in favour of a largely invented portrait.

Such apparently radical contentions will doubtless outrage those who like their biographical certitudes to be absolute, but, as I hope I will show, they are contentions that are considerably better supported by the evidence than almost any part of the current consensus. But before we begin any in-depth re-analysis of the data and its interpretation, I think we should look at how the current image was arrived at, and why it might be at the same time, so popular and so far-removed from any demonstrable reality.

The answer to the first part of this is, I believe, that his life has fallen victim, not simply to biographical selectivity, but to the process of iconisation. Lewis Carroll has become a myth almost as powerful as his fairy tale.

Carroll and his Alice have always shared a strange incestuous kind of immortality. Almost from the moment of her literary birth, they have been the two parts of a bizarre and unique symbiosis where the author and his creation have penetrated one another, merging until the boundaries of their identities are no longer clear. At the centre of the Alice stories lies the image of Carroll and at the centre of the Carroll image lies Alice. With the spread of his fame worldwide, the name "Lewis Carroll", an invention, the conceit of a man who liked to play with words and symbols, became in itself a word-symbol, a semi-tangible rendering of an idea. It became aspiration.

For the Victorians, caught as they were on the cusp of a new age in which all old certainties were dying, "Lewis Carroll" came to mean a readiness to believe — in wonderland, fairytales, innocence, sainthood, the fast-fading vision of a golden age when it seemed possible for humanity to transcend the human condition. Carroll became a way of affirming that such things really had once been. Even before Dodgson's death, his assumed name had become the ultimate embodiment of this Victorian aspiration toward otherworldliness. "Lewis Carroll" was the Pied Piper and Francis of Assisi. His supposed tenderness for all children was seen as part of a Christlike renunciation of adult pleasure and the adult world. It became an emanation of the strange Victorian obsession with childhood innocence, that identified immaturity with inviolability in a way impossible for us now.

In common with so many icons²-in-the-making, Dodgson himself was one of the first to perceive the growth of the myth surrounding Carroll, and with typical contrariness he both deplored and manipulated it. He instinctively

understood the power of an image. He was throughout his life, not only impulsive and contradictory, but also quite a shameless manipulator of his own persona, who could very cleverly present a view of himself designed to produce his desired effect, and as we will see further on "Carroll" began to be famous at precisely the time in Dodgson's life when he was most filled with self-doubt, most motivated to consciously re-invent himself. The guise of the patron saint of children offered itself at precisely the right time, and he took it up, as a part-time persona. By a kind of mutual agreement, he and his society began creating their mutually beneficial myth of Carroll and little girls.

Purity was exactly what the Victorians wanted to connect with Carroll, and purity was precisely what it (intermittently) suited Dodgson to have associated with himself. His genuine and instinctive affection for children began to be self-conscious, exaggerated, and, inevitably, somewhat insincere. He began to play the part of child-worshipper, with a strange mix of sincerity and irony. He invented the word "child-friend", but misused it, with almost malicious intent. He worshipped the child as an article of religious faith, and exploited it as a means of concealment for his own unconventional, possibly sexual, relationships with women. It was inextricably bound up with his wish to rediscover himself as an innocent man, and — on a different level — his cynical wish for others to see him as innocent. Carroll's love for the child was always in part a construction. In real terms, children were never as prominent in his life as the legend, or even Dodgson's own testimony, would have it.

"Carroll" became one of the truths by which his age measured itself and its values, and reassured itself that all was well. By the 1890s, the "reality" of this image was already an axiom, magazine articles celebrated "a genuine lover of children", "as tenderly attached to his mathematical studies as he is to children", inhabiting "an El Dorado of innocent delights". And even those who knew Dodgson, were persuaded that they saw Carroll and drew him in impossibly idealised lines. To his adoring artist friend Gertrude Thomson he was "not exactly an ordinary human being of flesh and blood. Rather ... some delicate, ethereal spirit, enveloped for the moment in a semblance of common humanity." (*Harper's Monthly Magazine*, July 1890, 254; *Illustrated News*, 4 April 1891, 435; Interviews and Recollections, 235) To an extent one can see the same compulsion operating in the biographies of other "immortal" children's storytellers. Hans Christian Andersen and Edward Lear have to a lesser degree been separated from the full meaning of their own lives, crammed, sometimes with great struggle, into the sailor-suit of perpetual childhood (an outfit that for Lear, with his syphilis and his possible bisexuality, seems particularly inappropriate), and then condemned for their inability to grow up. (Levi, 31) Perhaps there is something in us that refuses to allow the heroes of our own childhood out of the nursery, even while it finds them infinitely suspect for remaining there. But only Lewis Carroll has inspired such an irresistible need to realign him as a fiction. Only to him, partly by reason of his own personal charisma, and proactive involvement in making the legend, has it fallen to become a genuine icon, an image for every subsequent generation.

Even while Dodgson was still alive, and practising his own personal brand of morality, the evidence of possible sexual activity was the aspect of reality most invisible to the Carroll legend. In keeping with the vaguely religious and Christlike undertone of his mythology, Carroll has always, as an imperative, been required to appear chaste. Even now, when widely perceived as a deviant, he is defined absolutely as a non-practising, essentially innocent and virginal deviant. An abstinence from sexual activity is the first requirement of his mythology. It is an indication of the power of this need, as well as the extraordinary degree to which "Lewis Carroll" already enjoyed an existence independent of Dodgson in the public mind, that while this mythic image of child-centredness was already the assumed reality of "Carroll", his alter ego Charles Dodgson was the subject of a widespread gossip that contradicted this image almost entirely. Dodgson was being condemned and criticised for his unconventional contacts with grown women, even while "Carroll" was being sanctified for loving only children. The scandals about women and cutesy magazine stories of "little girls" co-existed but never touched. It is as if, in the public mind, the two were already quite separate individuals, and suggests that it is within our perception, not within him, that the famous "dual personality" has its root.

However complicit he may have been in using the prevalent fictions to his own advantage, the myth was not of Dodgson's making. It existed beyond his control, and it effortlessly survived him. While he lived, the drive to turn Dodgson into Carroll was held in check to an extent by his corporeal existence. Dodgson's life and the Carroll image existed in semi-detached tolerance of one another. But, when Dodgson died in the new year of 1898, "Carroll" continued with barely a blip, barely a shiver. To the irresistible process of bizarre apotheosis, the death was hardly more than the shedding of a skin.

Unsurprisingly, the obituaries of January 1898 set a tone of respectful eulogy on a Christian life decently lived. It is not surprising that they had nothing to say about its more controversial aspects. This was nineteenth century England, which did not have quite our modern appetite for the "outing" of the guilty. But amnesia about the reality of Dodgson's life extended beyond what was required by the most punctilious discretion, into something far stranger.

Over the years immediately following his death, many people who had known Charles Dodgson left their impressions of him. These were almost uniformly sincere tributes from those who had admired, respected or loved him. But even the most affectionate of them seemed unable to forget it was "Lewis Carroll" they were conjuring, and in pursuit of him, not only did they choose to disregard those aspects that might have appeared morally

ambiguous, they began a process of selective remembering, concentrating on the special, the magical, the unworldly or child-like aspects of Dodgson's character to the exclusion of the ordinary, the everyday, the "normal" or the worldly. It was as if they turned the general need to believe into an article of personal faith and themselves into disciples and handmaidens; clutching the hem of the new messiah as he danced down the roads of memory, touched by magic, softened by nostalgia; "the property of an older and vanishing world."

As he began to be seen across the great divide of a brand new century, as all the Victorian certainties collapsed into the disaster of the Great War, and the brave new world beyond, so the need to believe that what Carroll was seen to represent had once been real became ever more fervent. Alice Maitland's heartfelt cry, "Alas! alas! that life should change; ...all the dear, old, familiar places and faces disappear", could be the leitmotif for all such memoirists. In their poignant visions of antique rectitude, in the images of the perpetual child, lost in the golden splendour of a perpetual summer day, we see not reality but desperate and touching aspiration. The need to be sure that once it had really been like that. The memoirs are lyrical in their evocations of the latter-day Merlin, half lost in his own vivid fancy, or the quaint creaky philosopher with a heart of unassailable goodness. He was remembered as "one of the few genuine scholar-saints", as "a bringer of delight in those dim, far-off days", as "one of those innocents of whom is the Kingdom of Heaven". (*Interviews and Recollections*, 68-9, 124, 163, 181, 186.)

What he could never be was an adult, human male. And most things that demonstrated his sexual identity, his adulthood, were swiftly lost from the tradition, while hyperbole converted his eccentricities into near grotesqueries, his complexities into simplistic absolutes. He had to be sealed off from the ordinary, preserved for posterity, half in the cloister, half in fairyland. It was a process expedited, perhaps legitimised, by the first work of biography to appear after his death.

- "Lewis Carroll": A Myth in the Making
- The Early Biographies of Lewis Carroll
- Tony Goldschmidt and the Freudian Influence
- The Dodgson Family and Their Legacy
- Modern Biography and Lewis Carroll, 1969-98



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