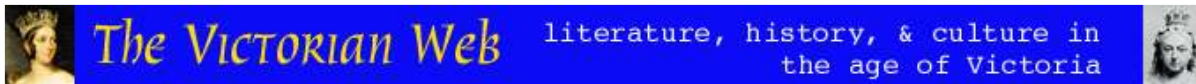


Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll): A Brief Biography

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Antecedents and Early Life

"Lewis Carroll," as he was to become known, was born on January 27 1832. His family was predominantly northern English, with Irish connections, Conservative, Anglican, [High Church](#), upper middle class, and inclining towards the two good old upper middle class professions of the army and the Church. His great-grandfather, also Charles Dodgson, had risen through the ranks of the church to become a bishop; his grandfather, another Charles, had been an army captain, killed most romantically in action in 1803 while his two sons were hardly more than babies.

The elder of these — yet another Charles — reverted to the other family business and took holy orders. He went to Westminster, one of England's famous seven [public schools](#), and thence to Oxford. He was mathematically brilliant and won an astonishing double first which could have been, but turned out not to be, the prelude to a brilliant career. Instead he married his cousin in 1827 and retired into obscurity as a country parson.



Young Charles was born in the little parsonage of Daresbury in Cheshire, the oldest boy but already the third child of the four-and-a-half year marriage. Eight more were to follow and, incredibly for the time, all of them --- seven girls and four boys — survived into adulthood. When Charles was 11 his father was given the living of Crofton-Tees in north Yorkshire, and the whole family moved to the spacious Rectory. This remained their home for the next 25 years. Dodgson senior made some progress through the ranks of the church: he published some sermons, translated Tertullian, became an Archdeacon of Ripon cathedral, and involved himself, sometimes influentially, in the intense religious disputes that were dividing the Anglican church. He was High Church, inclining to Anglo-Catholicism, an admirer of [Newman](#) and the [Tractarian movement](#), and he did his best to instil such views in his children.

Young Charles grew out of infancy into a bright, articulate boy. In the early years he was educated at home. His "reading lists" preserved in the family testify to a precocious intellect: at the age of seven the child was reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is often said that he was naturally left-handed and suffered severe psychological trauma by being forced to counteract this tendency, but there is no documentary evidence to support this. At twelve he was sent away to a small private school at nearby Richmond, where he appears to have been happy and settled. But in 1845, young Dodgson moved on to Rugby School, where he was evidently less happy, for as he wrote some years after leaving the place.

I cannot say ... that any earthly considerations would induce me to go through my three years again ... I can honestly say that if I could have been ... secure from annoyance at night, the hardships of the daily life would have been comparative trifles to bear.

The nature of this nocturnal 'annoyance' will probably never now be fully understood, but it may be that he is delicately referring to some form of sexual abuse. Scholastically, though, he excelled with apparent ease. "I have not had a more promising boy his age since I came to Rugby" observed R.B. Mayor, the Maths master.

Oxford

He left Rugby at the end of 1849 and, after an interval which remains unexplained, went on in January 1851 to Oxford: to his father's old college, Christ Church. Oxford and beyond He had only been at Oxford two days when he received a summons home. His mother had died of "Inflammation of the Brain" — perhaps meningitis or a stroke — at the age of forty-seven. Whatever Dodgson's feelings may have been about this death, he did not allow them to distract him too much from his purpose at Oxford. He may not always have worked hard, but he was exceptionally gifted and achievement came easily to him. The following year he achieved a first in Honour Moderations, and shortly after he was nominated to a Studentship (the Christ Church equivalent of a fellowship), by his father's old friend Canon [Edward Pusey](#).

His early academic career veered between high octane promise, and irresistible distraction. Through his own laziness, he failed an important scholarship, but still his clear brilliance as a mathematician won him the Christ Church Mathematical Lectureship, which he continued to hold for the next 26 years. The income was good, but the work bored him. Many of his pupils were stupid, older than him, richer than him, and almost all of them were uninterested. They didn't want to be taught, he didn't want to teach them. Mutual apathy ruled.

In 1856 he took up the new art form of photography. He excelled at it and it became an expression of his very personal inner philosophy; a belief in the divinity of what he called "beauty" by which he seemed to mean a state of moral or aesthetic or physical perfection. He found this divine beauty not simply in the magic of theatre, but in the poetry of words, in a mathematical formula; and perhaps supremely, in the human form; in the body-images that moved him. When he took up photography he sought with his own representations, to combine the ideals of freedom and beauty into the innocence of Eden, where the human body and human contact could be enjoyed without shame. In his middle age, he was to re-form this philosophy into the pursuit of beauty as a state of Grace, a means of retrieving lost innocence. This, along with his lifelong passion for the theatre was to bring him into confrontation with the Moral Majority of his day and his own family's High Church beliefs.

The young adult Charles Dodgson was about six foot tall, slender and handsome in a soft-focused dreamy sort of way, with curling brown hair and blue eyes. At the unusually late age of seventeen he suffered a severe attack of whooping cough which left him with poor hearing in his right ear and was probably responsible for his chronically weak chest in later life, but the only overt defect he carried into adulthood was what he referred to as his "hesitation" — a stammer he had acquired in early childhood and which was to plague him throughout his entire life. The stammer has always been a potent part of the myth. It is part of the mythology that Carroll only stammered in adult company, and was free and fluent with children, but there is nothing to support this idea. Many children of his acquaintance remembered the stammer; many adults failed to notice it. It came and went for its own reasons, but not as a cliché manifestation of fear of the adult world. Dodgson himself was far more acutely aware of it than most people he met. Although his stammer troubled him — even obsessed him sometimes — it was never bad enough to stop him using his other qualities to do well in society.

He was naturally gregarious, egoistic enough to relish attention and admiration. At a time when people devised their own amusements, when singing and recitation were required social skills, this youth was well-equipped as an engaging entertainer. He could sing tolerably well and was not afraid to do so in front of an audience. He was adept at mimicry and story-telling. He was something of a star at charades. He could be charming, pushy, manipulative, with the kind of ready sensitivity vulnerable women are apt to find irresistible. There are brief hints at a soaring sense of the spiritual and the divine; small moments that reveal a rich and intensely-lived inner life. 'That is a wild and beautiful bit of poetry, the song of "call the cattle home",' he suddenly observed, in the midst of an analysis of [Kingsley's](#) novel *Alton Locke*:

'I remember hearing it sung at Albrighton: I wonder if any one there could have entered into the spirit of *Alton Locke*. I think not. I think the character of most that I meet is merely refined animal... How few seem to care for the only subjects of real interest in life'.

He was also quite nakedly socially ambitious, anxious to make his mark on the world in some way, as a writer, as an artist. His scholastic career was only a stop-gap to other more exciting attainments that he wanted hungrily. He was writing — poetry, short stories, sending them to various magazines, and already enjoying moderate success. Between '54 and '56, his work appeared in the national publications, *The Comic Times* and *The Train*, as well as smaller magazines like the *Whitby Gazette* and the *Oxford Critic*. Most of his output was funny, sometimes satirical. But his standards and his ambitions were exacting. "I do not think I have yet written anything worthy of real publication (in which I do not include the *Whitby Gazette* or the *Oxonian Advertiser*), but I do not despair of doing so some day," he wrote in July 1855. Years before Alice, he was thinking up ideas for children's books that would make money: 'Christmas book [that would] sell well... Practical hints for constructing Marionettes and a theatre' His ideas got better as he got older, but the canny mind, with an eye to income, was always there.

In 1856 he published his first piece of work under the name that would make him famous. A very predictable little romantic poem called "Solitude" appeared in the *Train* under the authorship of 'Lewis Carroll'. In the same year, a new Dean arrived at Christ Church, Henry Liddell, bringing with him a young wife and children, all of whom would figure largely in Dodgson's life over the following years. He became close friends with the mother and the children, particularly the three sisters — Ina, Alice and Edith. It seems there became something of a tradition of his taking the girls out on the river for picnics at Godstow or Nuneham.

It was on one such expedition, in 1862, that Dodgson invented the outline of the story that eventually became his first and largest commercial success — the first Alice book. Having told the story and been begged by Alice Liddell to write it down, Dodgson was evidently struck by its potential to sell well. He took the MS to Macmillan the publisher who liked it immediately. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published in 1865, under the pen-name Dodgson had first used some nine years earlier — Lewis Carroll.

With the launch and immediately phenomenal success of *Alice*, the story of the author's life becomes effectively divided in two: the continuing story of Dodgson's real life and the evolving myth surrounding "Lewis Carroll." Carroll quickly became a rich and detailed alter ego. A persona as famous and deeply embedded in the popular psyche as the story he told. To him belongs a large part of the image of 'little girls' and strange otherworldliness, that we know as the author of *Alice*. Dodgson's reality remained and remains largely obscure. It has been ignored, even by the most recent and reputed of modern biographers, in all, but its briefest outline. It is undisputed that throughout his growing wealth and fame, he continued to teach at Christ Church until 1881, and that he remained in residence there until his death. He published *Through the Looking-Glass and what Alice found there* in 1872, his great Joycean mock-epic *The Hunting of the Snark*, in 1876, and his last novel the two volume *Sylvie and Bruno* in 1889 and 1893 respectively. He also published many mathematical papers under his own name, courted scandal through his associations with the opposite sex, toured Russia and Europe on an extended visit (in 1867) and bought a house in Guildford, where he died, suddenly of violent pneumonia, in January 14 1898, leaving mystery and enigma behind him.

The more than an century that has elapsed since then has shown an explosion of the Carroll mythology. Elaborate tales are now told of the how and why of Dodgson's life and mind. He has been presented as paedophile, perpetual child, as scholar-saint as innocent dreamer of children, as a deviant resident in an ivory tower or dreaming spire. But how did these truths get here? Are they any kind of reality? The [linked extracts](#) from *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild* will try and answer these questions, and trace the strange story of how "Carroll" came to be born and to eclipse the reality of the man who created him.



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