

THE STORY OF
ALICE

*Lewis Carroll
and the Secret History
of Wonderland*

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The idea that anyone else might be interested in his childhood would probably have puzzled Carroll; even he usually avoided the subject, as if nervous about trespassing on holy ground. But if he seldom referred to his early years, that may be because he never really left them behind. Long after he had become an adult, they continued to trail him like a shadow.

Carroll was born on 27 January 1832, in the sleepy, scattered Cheshire parish of Daresbury, the eldest son of a sternly intelligent perpetual curate and his loving but self-effacing wife. His first eleven years would later be recorded chiefly as a happy blank. The biography written by his nephew Stuart Dodgson Collingwood struggles to fill even a handful of pages, and repeatedly resorts to words such as ‘uneventful’, ‘quiet’ and ‘seclusion’, noting with some desperation that ‘the passing of a cart was a matter of great interest to the children’. This isolation was chiefly a practical matter, cutting off the Dodgson family from the strong currents of social change that were starting to tug at other lives (1832 was also the year of the first Reform Bill), but it is notable that on one of the rare occasions that Carroll wrote about Daresbury – a name with punning potential he would later exploit – he began by comparing himself to a character in an adventure story. The ‘happy spot where I was born’, he writes in ‘Faces in the Fire’ (1860), was ‘An island farm – broad seas of corn | Stirred by the wandering breath of morn’. It is a poem that imagines his birth as a kind of shipwreck, as if he was a modern Robinson Crusoe, enviously watching the wind move freely around him as he plotted his escape.

His family’s seclusion was probably a blessing in disguise. Whereas in the squalid industrial slums of Manchester, just twenty-five miles away, infant mortality had reached 57 per cent by 1840, Carroll and his ten siblings

– three brothers and seven sisters – would all survive into adulthood. Even by Victorian standards of fertility this was a large family (in the period from the 1830s to the 1870s the average number of children born to middle-class parents was between five and seven), and it was the difficulty of supporting it on a curate’s stipend that lay behind the genteel lobbying through which Carroll’s father eventually secured a much more valuable living in the small North Yorkshire spa town of Croft-on-Tees. The Dodgsons moved there in 1843, when Carroll (known to his family as ‘Charlie’) was eleven, and for the next twenty-five years their home would be a rambling Georgian rectory opposite Croft’s squat-towered and ‘very respectable’ Norman church.

It is here that Carroll first made his mark as a writer. On a second-floor window that lit the hallway leading to his bedroom, three workmen had inscribed their names on the outside of the glass, which from their perspective read:

T Young Painted July 23 1836
Plumer an Glazer an Tiner 9th August 1830
Edward Johnson Plumber Darlington 1834

– and as seen from the hallway read:

Edward Johnson Plumber Darlington 1834
Plumer an Glazer an Tiner 9th August 1830
T Young Painted July 23 1836

The strangeness of such reversals, turning everyday words into a form of mysterious code, is something Carroll would later remember when producing the mirror writing of ‘Jabberwocky’. However, when in 1878 he signed a letter to one child-friend *Horror Carroll* he was also retracing a moment from his own childhood, because at some stage he decided to play the workmen’s game in reverse. Still visible in the Rectory are the initials ‘C.L.D.’ (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) that he etched in fiddly and precise letters on two panes of glass. Seen from the inside, they cast ghostly traces of Carroll’s presence on to the trees and sky beyond; seen

from the outside, they turned his family into characters in a domestic looking-glass world.

Equally enduring was a collection of objects that he helped to hide under the nursery floorboards, although little is known about when this was done or why these particular items were chosen. Most of the objects have survived, but their secret histories have been lost, so in their current state they are hard to distinguish from the fragile bric-a-brac of any Victorian family. They include a linen handkerchief delicately embroidered with lilac flowers, a child's battered leather shoe, and a hand-stitched glove that may once have been white but is now crusty and liver-spotted with age. Fragments of a clay pipe and crab shell are muddled together with a thimble, a tiny penknife, a crocheting instrument and some pieces from a dolls' china tea set. Other items include a printed cardboard 'S', a geometrical counter for a game and a sample of Carroll's handwriting. Just one or two objects might be dismissed as a household accident, like the missing toy plane in Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971), 'two inches of heavy snub silver' that spins through 'a hole in the classroom-floorboards, softly, into the rat-droppings and coins'. However, the fact



Glove hidden under the floorboards of Carroll's childhood home
in Croft-on-Tees (c. 1843)

that the Dodgson family's physical clutter was originally accompanied by a note written by some local builders stating that 'This floor was laid by Mr Martin and Mr Sutton June 19th 1843' suggests that it was a deliberate collection. Possibly it was deposited to mark the family's arrival in their new home: items like children's shoes were still occasionally hidden behind walls or under floorboards as symbols of good luck, rather as horseshoes are hung on walls today, long after a genuine belief in their magical powers had faded to a nagging superstition. Alternatively, it could have been a little museum of domestic life to which everyone contributed, like those that children later in the century would be encouraged to assemble. But whatever the original intention behind this three-dimensional scrapbook, its real importance to Carroll only became clear many years later.

In fiction, scenes such as Esther burying her doll near the start of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53) usually signal a type of symbolic renunciation; Esther puts away her childish things once she learns that childhood is not a fixed period of time but a state of mind she can no longer afford. Carroll, on the other hand, appears to have treated his family's things more like the 'small grey elephant', 'large beetle with a red stomach' and 'finely modelled bull with a *suède* skin' that the children in Kenneth Grahame's collection of stories *Dream Days* (1898) bury in their garden to prove that their love for these old toys 'was not entirely broken . . . one link remained between us and them'. The Dodgson hoard was not discovered until 1950, when the nursery floor was taken up during more building work, but long before that Carroll had shown that he was capable of treating it in a similar way to the children in Grahame's story. It was a private time capsule he could dip into in his writing whenever he wanted to investigate the links between himself and his childhood, allowing him to lift up a loose floorboard in his memory and bring the buried treasures of the past to light.

Even when he was writing about fictional characters, Carroll enjoyed rummaging around in his mind for interesting physical odds and ends. He remained especially fond of objects such as thimbles, which frequently rose to the surface of his writing even when its real subject was something

Snark-hunters going forth 'To seek it with thimbles' (Carroll suggested to his illustrator Henry Holiday that he might want to add 'a shower of thimbles' to any accompanying picture), while in 1890 he wrote to Queen Victoria's granddaughter Princess Alice promising her a golden armchair with crimson velvet cushions, 'made so that you can fold it up small, and put it in a thimble, and carry it about in your pocket!' He was equally interested in gloves. Not only did he insist on a particular grey and black cotton style for himself, but he was delighted to notice that 'gloves' has the word 'love' hidden inside it, informing a girl who had sent him 'sacks full of love' that she must have meant a sack full of gloves, and thanking her for the 500 pairs that had just been delivered. He also took pleasure in coming up with fanciful explanations for words such as 'foxglove', telling the young actress Isa Bowman that fairies 'took great pride in their dainty hands', and so 'made themselves gloves out of the flowers', which eventually became known as 'folks' gloves' or foxgloves.

These ideas sometimes sparked off more subtle and sideways connections in Carroll's mind. For example, the fragment of handwriting he hid under the nursery floor was part of an anonymous broadside ballad, which in Carroll's version ran 'And we'll wander through | the wide world | and chase the buffalo.' The ballad was especially popular in the first half of the nineteenth century, the most polished example probably being the one produced by the printer James Catnach in *Seven Dials*:

Come all you young fellows that have a mind to range
Into some foreign country your station for to change
Into some foreign country away from her to go
We lay down on the banks of the pleasant Ohio
We wander thro' the wild woods and chase the Buffalo.

This appears below a clumsy woodcut that shows a clerk being persuaded to leave his job by a sharply dressed friend, who is tipping up his chair in eagerness to be gone. Like many early emigration fantasies, the ballad depicts America as a classical Arcadia that has been relocated to the west

and brought up to date, and it is also enticingly close to being a fairy-tale land where 'wild woods' beckon and mysterious shaggy creatures roam. Carroll's misquotation goes even further in this direction: 'wide world' rather than 'wild woods' may simply be a slip of the pen, but in the light of his later works it sounds suspiciously like the preliminary sketch for a literary manifesto – a promise to track down the weird and wonderful no matter how hard it tried to escape.

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