Charles Lutwidge Dodgson

Lewis Carroll

A BIOGRAPHY

by

Morton N. Cohen

VINTAGE BOOKS
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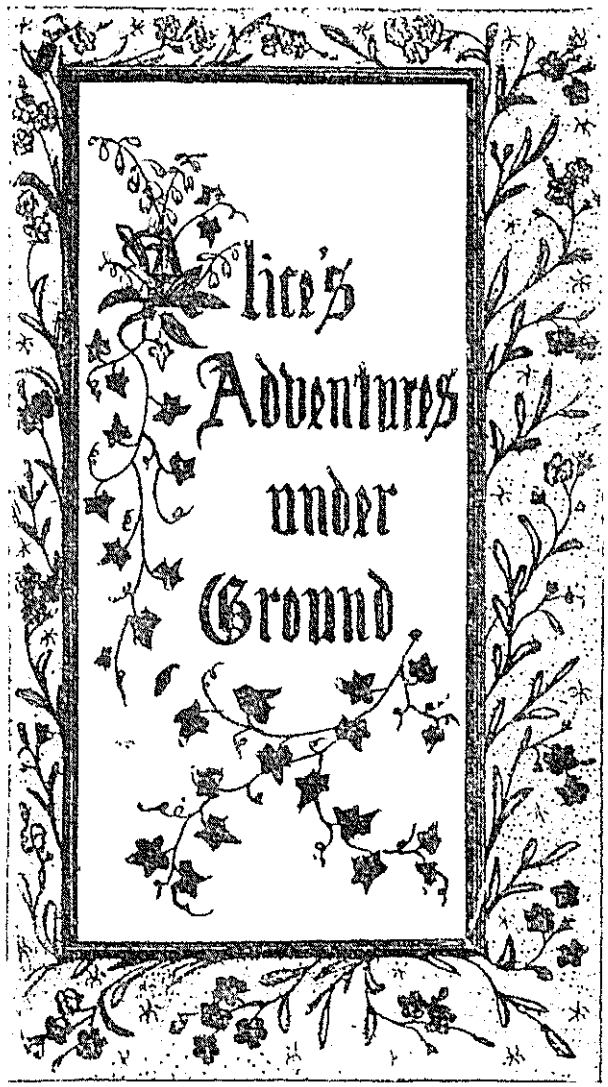
NEW YORK



Charles's own design for the title page of Alice's Adventures Under Ground, *his Christmas gift to Alice Liddell*

CHAPTER FIVE

The Alice *Books*

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.

LEWIS CARROLL

It had to happen. Charles's stern self-discipline, his determination to control thought and action, his deep commitment to the child, his friendship with the Liddell sisters, his suppressed emotional life, and his fount of endless energy joined forces to produce a creative burst. The result was Alice's adventures, first underground, where Charles's emotional promptings lived concealed, and later, after more careful deliberation, in Wonderland.

It happened on that "golden afternoon" in the summer of 1862. The circumstances were ideal: Charles was in his element, with the three Liddell sisters, ranging in age from eight to thirteen, and Duckworth, with his singing voice, together gliding languidly over the shimmering water. There they were, alone on the watery sanctuary, secluded in the world of the boat, self-contained, close to one another, far away from family, governess, society, duty, unified by their banter, their joviality, their unaffected laughter. "Tell us a story," the little priestesses demanded. And out it poured, the story of Alice down the rabbit hole.

The tale is light as air, and it almost evaporated. It would have done, too, but for the persistence of ten-year-old Alice. In later years she recalled that the tale Charles told "must have been better than usual" because "on the next day I started to pester him to write down the story for me which I had never

Chapter I

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, and what is the use of a book, thought Alice, without pictures or conversations! So she was considering in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain was worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when a white rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her

There was nothing very remarkable in that, nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the rabbit say to itself "dear, dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for

quite dull and stupid for things to go on in the common way

So she set to work, and very soon finished off the cake

* * * * *

"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice, (she was so surprised that she quite forgot how to speak good English) "now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Goodbye, feet!" (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed almost out of sight, they were getting so far off) "oh, my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now, dears? I'm sure I can't! I shall be a great deal too far off to bother myself about you: you must manage the best way you can — but I must be kind to them," thought Alice, "or perhaps they won't walk the way I want to go! Let me see: I'll give them a new pair of boots every Christmas"

And she went on planning to herself how she would manage it

than she expected: before she had drunk half the bottle, she found her head pressing against the ceiling, and she stooped to save her neck from being broken, and hastily put down the bottle, saying to herself "that's quite enough — I hope I shan't grow any more — I wish I hadn't drunk so much!"

Alas! it was too late: she went on growing and growing, and very soon had to kneel down: in another minute there was not room even for this, and she tried the effect of lying down, with one elbow against the door, and the other arm curled round her head. Still she went on growing, and as a last resource she put one arm out of the window, and one foot up the chimney, and said to herself "now I can do no more — what will become of me?"

"Everybody says 'come on!' here," thought Alice, as she walked slowly after the Gryphon; "I never was ordered about so before in all my life — never!"

They had not gone far before they saw the Mock Turtle in the distance, sitting sad and lonely on a little ledge of rock, and, as they came nearer, Alice could hear it sighing as if it its heart would break. She pitied it deeply: what is its sorrow?" she asked the Gryphon, and the Gryphon answered, very nearly in the same words as before, "it's all its fancy, that: it hasn't got no sorrow, you know: come on!"

So they went up to the Mock Turtle, who looked at them with large eyes full of tears, but said nothing.

"This here young lady" said the Gryphon,

"The Queen of Hearts she made some tarts
All on a summer day:
The Knave of Hearts he stole those tarts,
And took them quite away!"

"Now for the evidence," said the King, "and then the sentence."

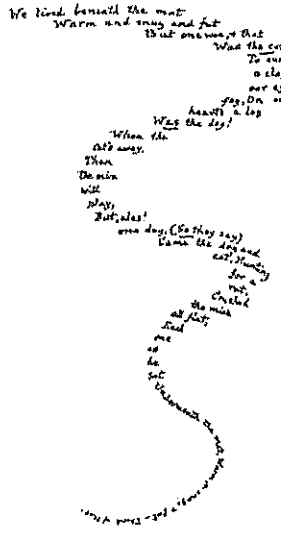
"No!" said the Queen, "first the sentence, and then the evidence!"

"Nonsense!" cried Alice, so loudly that everybody jumped, "the idea of having the sentence first!"

"Hold your tongue!" said the Queen,

"I won't!" said Alice, "you're nothing but a pack of cards! Who cares for you?"

At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her: she gave a little scream of fright, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some leaves that had fluttered down from the trees on to her face.



Pages from Alice's Adventures Under Ground, *the original version of the* Alice *story, in Charles's handwriting and with his own illustrations*

done before." She "kept going on, going on" at him until he promised to oblige her.[1] For one reason or another, however, it took him two and a half years to deliver the completed manuscript, illustrated with his own drawings.

In the meantime, encouragement to publish the story came from Mr. and Mrs. George MacDonald, friends whose taste and judgment he trusted. As the MacDonalds read the draft, they probably recognized elements of George MacDonald's *Phantastes,* his 1858 fairy tale, which Charles knew well. In any event, they read the *Alice* story to their household of children. One of them, Greville, remembered "that first reading well, and also . . . that I wished there were 60,000 volumes of it."[2] Mrs. MacDonald wrote announcing the verdict: "They wish me to publish," Charles proclaimed (May 9, 1863) to his diary.

He presented the green leather booklet containing the neatly handscripted text to Alice in 1864 as a Christmas gift, a year and a half after the break with the Liddells. The booklet found its way into the hands of visitors to the deanery. Henry Kingsley, novelist brother of Charles Kingsley, chanced upon it and insisted that Mrs. Liddell urge its author to publish it. Charles got the message, but by then he was already well along the publication road. He tells us later, in the preface to *Alice's Adventures Under Ground,* that "there was no idea of publication in my mind when I wrote this little book: *that* was wholly an afterthought, pressed on me by the 'perhaps too partial friends' who always have to bear the blame when a writer rushes into print."

Later, when composing the preface to the first facsimile edition, Charles described the early version as merely "the germ that was to grow into the published volume"; in fact, he decided that before publishing, he would have to flesh out the original with more chapters, incidents, and characters.

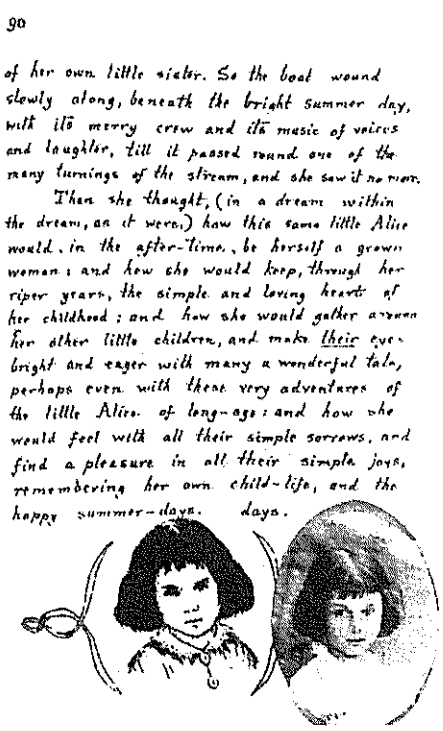
He needed a proper publisher. Although Oxford presses had been printing his esoteric pamphlets, he had no experience with high-powered London publishers. He now found one through a friend. On October 19, 1863, he went by invitation to visit Thomas Combe. Charles had visited him and his wife before and had already photographed the strikingly handsome Combe. But on this particular evening he went expressly "to meet the publisher [Alexander] Macmillan," Combe's guest, the younger of the Macmillan brothers who in the mid-1840s founded the now well-established publishing house.

Because Macmillan had published Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* five months earlier, Charles may have hoped to interest him in his children's tale, or the subject of the *Alice* story may have come up casually in conversation. Whatever the case, Macmillan liked Charles's story and agreed to publish it.

John Tenniel, famous Punch *political cartoonist, who illustrated the first published edition of* Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. *He forced Charles to delete a chapter in* Through the Looking-Glass *because when he came to illustrate it, he decided that "a* wasp *in a* wig *is altogether beyond the appliances of art."*

The next step for Charles was to find an illustrator. Duckworth mentioned John Tenniel, already a famous artist, whose drawings appeared regularly in *Punch.* His style suited Charles perfectly, and he decided to see if the artist would collaborate. Two months after the meeting with Macmillan (December 20, 1863), he wrote his acquaintance Tom Taylor, the popular playwright, asking him if he knew Tenniel well enough "to say whether he could undertake such a thing as drawing a dozen wood-cuts to illustrate a child's book" and if so whether Taylor would be willing to put him in touch with Tenniel. "The reasons for which I ask," Charles wrote Taylor, ". . . are that I have written such a tale for a young friend, and illustrated it in pen and ink. It has been read and liked by so many children, and I have been so often asked to publish it, that I have decided on so doing. . . . If [Mr. Tenniel] . . . should be willing to undertake [the illustrations] . . . , I would send him the book to look over, not that he should at all follow my pictures, but simply to give him an idea of the sort of thing I want."

A month later (January 25, 1864), Charles called on Tenniel in London, carrying Taylor's letter of introduction. He "was very friendly," Charles wrote, "and seemed to think favourably of undertaking the pictures." Tenniel first saw the early text and then the expanded tale, more than twice the length of the original. Charles had worked hard on the story. The Mouse's tale was much altered, the Mad Tea-Party appeared for the first time, and the trial scene at the end of the story, occupying two pages in the early version, grew to two chapters of twenty-six pages.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of her own little sister. So the boat wound slowly along, beneath the bright summer day, with its merry crew and its music of voices and laughter, till it passed round one of the many turnings of the stream, and she saw it no more.

Then she thought, (in a dream within the dream, as it were,) how this same little Alice would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather around her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a wonderful tale, perhaps even with these very adventures of the little Alice of long-ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer-days.

"The Hidden Alice": Charles first drew a picture of Alice at the end of the manuscript of Alice's Adventures Under Ground; *then, dissatisfied with the result, he pasted over it a trimmed photograph he had taken of his ideal child friend.*

Charles also changed the title. He called the booklet he had given Alice *Alice's Adventures Under Ground.* But he was apparently unhappy with that title and, after casting about for a new one, settled on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.*

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1864, Charles discussed, in person and by letter, various production details with Macmillan and Tenniel. A stream of letters flowed back and forth between Charles and Macmillan through the autumn. The exchanges between Charles and Tenniel are not well documented because Tenniel probably destroyed Charles's letters, and only a few brief notes from Tenniel survive. But we know enough to correct the myth that paints Tenniel as a long-suffering illustrator victimized by the iron whim of a merciless, exacting fledgling. The myth probably originated with Harry Furniss, another *Punch* caricaturist who, three years after Charles's death, published a two-volume memoir in which he pilloried

Charles. He claimed that after *Alice,* "Tenniel had point-blank refused to illustrate another story," that Charles "was . . . 'impossible.' " He described Charles as "a wit, a gentleman, a bore and an egotist—and, like Hans Andersen, a spoilt child. . . . Tenniel and other artists declared I would not work with Carroll for seven weeks!"[3]

But most of the letters that Charles wrote to Furniss when they collaborated later on the *Sylvie and Bruno* books, and the few from Furniss that survive, reveal Charles patient and considerate on almost every point and Furniss ever-hasty and often provocative. In the end, Furniss lasted longer than seven weeks with Charles, but much of the credit for the successful collaboration is owing to Charles, not to Furniss. True, Charles was a perfectionist and deluged his illustrators with suggestions, but he almost always gave way to the artist's taste when a disagreement arose. He suffered untold rebuffs from both Tenniel and Furniss but bore them in silence.

The most telling example of Charles's willingness to reconcile himself to the demands of an illustrator occurred just after *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* appeared. The Clarendon Press printed two thousand copies of what has come to be known as the first edition. On June 27, 1865, Charles noted that the press had sent its first copies to Macmillan, and on July 15 he went to London to inscribe "20 or more copies of *Alice* to go as presents to various friends." Four days later, on July 19, came the shock: "Heard from Tenniel, who is dissatisfied with the printing of the pictures." Charles himself expressed no displeasure either with Tenniel's drawings or with the printing. The next day he called on Macmillan and showed him Tenniel's letter: "I suppose we shall have to do it all again," he recorded. Less than a fortnight after that (August 2), Charles wrote: "Finally decided on the re-print of *Alice,* and that the first 2000 shall be sold as waste paper. Wrote about it to Macmillan, Combe and Tenniel."

Charles immediately tried to recall the copies already dispatched to friends, promising replacements from the new printing. He engaged a different printer, Richard Clay of London, and the first copy of the new impression arrived at Christ Church on November 9. Charles heard from Tenniel, "approving the new impression." Because his arrangements with Macmillan called for him to pay all costs—printing, engraving, even advertising—and for the publisher, Macmillan, to receive a fixed commission on sales, Charles bore the entire loss. It cost him six hundred pounds to reprint the book, as he calculated it, "6*s.* a copy of the 2000. If I make £500 by sale," he added, "this will be a loss of £100, and the loss of the first 2000 will prob-

ably be £100, leaving me £200 out of pocket." For a thirty-three-year-old Oxford lecturer with a modest income, these figures make the head reel. But Charles, who himself refused to compromise on the quality of his books, respected Tenniel's objection and was determined to satisfy him. "If a second 2000 could be sold," he wrote in his diary, "it would cost £300, and bring in £500, thus squaring accounts: any other further sale would be a gain. But that I can hardly hope for," he concluded, unaware that he had on his hands one of the most lucrative children's books ever to come to market.

Some commentators have too hastily concluded that Charles, dissatisfied with the printing, scrapped the first edition, but it was entirely Tenniel's doing. Tenniel himself boasted to the brothers Dalziel, his engravers: "I protested so strongly against the disgraceful printing that . . . [Dodgson] *cancelled the edition.*"[4]

Both Charles and Tenniel would be stunned to learn that a single copy of that "inferior" first edition today commands a king's ransom when it comes up for sale. Collectors would trade whole segments of their libraries for a single copy of the "first" *Alice;* bibliographers dream of uncovering an unrecorded copy; and literary chroniclers are at a loss to explain how, even in the heyday of Victorian publishing, such extravagant decisions could have been made over a single children's book.

Charles sent copies of the new impression to his friends. Christina Rossetti wrote to offer "a thousand and one thanks . . . for the funny pretty book you have so very kindly sent me. My Mother and Sister as well as myself made ourselves quite at home yesterday in Wonderland: and . . . I confess it would give me sincere pleasure to fall in with that conversational rabbit, that endearing puppy, that very-sparkling dormouse. Of the hatter's acquaintance I am not ambitious, and the March hare may fairly remain an open question. The woodcuts are charming."[5] Her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti also wrote: "I saw *Alice in Wonderland* at my sister's, and was glad to find myself still childish enough to enjoy looking through it very much. The wonderful ballad of Father William and Alice's perverted snatches of school poetry are among the funniest things I have seen for a long while."[6] Henry Kingsley wrote: "Many thanks for your charming little book. . . . I received it in bed in the morning, and in spite of threats and persuasions, in bed I stayed until I had read every word of it. I could pay you no higher compliment . . . than confessing that I could not stop reading . . . till I had finished it. The fancy of the whole thing is delicious. . . . Your versification is a gift I envy you very much."[7]

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was widely reviewed and earned almost unconditional praise. Charles's diary lists nineteen notices. The *Reader* (November 18, 1865) termed it "a glorious artistic treasure . . . a book to put on one's shelf as an antidote to a fit of the blues." The *Press* (November 25) liked its "simple and attractive style," judged it "amusingly written," and concluded that "a child, when once the tale has been commenced, will long to hear the whole of this wondrous narrative." The *Publisher's Circular* (December 8) selected it as "the most original and most charming" of the two hundred books for children sent them that year; the *Bookseller* (December 12) was "delighted. . . . A more original fairy tale . . . it has not lately been our good fortune to read"; and the *Guardian* (December 13) judged the "nonsense so graceful and so full of humour that one can hardly help reading it through." The *Athenaeum* (December 16) was a clear exception: "We fancy that any child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, overwrought story."[8]

The tale pleased the reading public. Sales started steady, then spiraled upward. The audience of admirers widened, translations into other languages followed, edition after edition was called for, through Charles's lifetime.

Reading the reviews and noting the agreeable sales reports, Charles bethought himself, considered his future as an author of children's books, and decided that he could do more with Alice. Nine months after the second impression of *Alice* appeared (August 24, 1866), he wrote to Macmillan: "It will probably be some time before I again indulge in paper and print. I have, however, a floating idea of writing a sort of sequel to *Alice,* and if it ever comes to anything, I intend to consult you at the very outset, so as to have the thing properly managed from the beginning." By the end of the year Charles had "added a few pages to the second volume of *Alice*"; and on February 6, 1867, he was "hoping before long to complete another book about 'Alice.' . . . You would not, I presume," he wrote Macmillan, "object to publish the book, if it should ever reach completion." The next mention occurs when Charles wrote a friend (December 15, 1867) that "Alice's visit to Looking-Glass House is getting on pretty well." Liddon apparently suggested the title *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There.*[9]

A major obstacle still loomed ahead, however: once again Charles needed an illustrator. Tenniel was an obvious choice—or was he, after the debacle of the first printing? Charles knew that it would be difficult to find a suitable replacement, someone as good and as famous. He made the approach. The answer, however, was a resounding no: Tenniel was too busy. Charles

withdrew. He tried to find another artist—Richard Doyle, Sir Joseph Noël Paton, even W. S. Gilbert, whose *Bab Ballads* were then appearing with his own illustrations in *Fun*. For various reasons, however, none of these came to the rescue. In fact, two and a half years passed before Charles finally persuaded Tenniel to illustrate the book, and even then the artist consented to draw the pictures only "at such time as he can find."

Charles sent the first chapter of his looking-glass story to Macmillan on January 12, 1869, but two more years passed before he finished it. And even then further delays occurred. "*Through the Looking-Glass* . . . lingers on, though the text is ready," he noted in August 1871, adding, "I have only received twenty-seven pictures." Four days later he wrote to Tenniel "accepting the melancholy . . . fact that we cannot get . . . *Looking-Glass* out by Michaelmas."

When Tenniel supplied the drawing of the Jabberwock for a frontispiece, Charles grew concerned that the monster would frighten his young readers and sent copies of the drawing to thirty mothers asking their opinion. They confirmed his fears, and he substituted the drawing of the White Knight at the front of the book and tucked the Jabberwock away deep in the text.

Tenniel finally finished, and through the spring and summer of 1871 Charles kept up a flow of letters to Macmillan about reprinting *Alice* for Christmas and getting *Looking-Glass* out at the same time. When Charles suggested delaying *Looking-Glass* yet again, concerned lest haste mar the book's quality, Macmillan protested (November 6): "Your proposal is worse than the cruellest ogre ever conceived in darkest and most malignant moods. . . . Why, half the children will be laid up with pure vexation and anguish of spirit. Plum pudding of the delicatest, toys the most elaborate will have no charms. Darkness will come over all hearths, gloom will hover over the brightest boards. Don't think of it for a moment. The book must come out for Christmas or I don't know what will be the consequence. . . . Don't for any sake keep it back." Later that month the book went to press. Although the title page bears the publication date 1872, *Looking-Glass* appeared as a Christmas book for 1871.

It was an immediate success. On November 30, before Charles saw his first copy, he was amazed that Macmillan already had orders for seventy-five hundred *Looking-Glasses*: "They printed 9000," he noted, "and are at once going to print 6000 more!" Six days later he received the first copy, and three days after that three bound in morocco (for Alice, Ellen Terry's younger sister Florence, and Tennyson) and a hundred in cloth. Then, with the help of Parker's, the Oxford stationer, he packed them off to friends.

Having had his fingers burned by the original printing of *Alice,* he was ever watchful with the printing of *Looking-Glass.* He wrote to Macmillan (December 17, 1871):

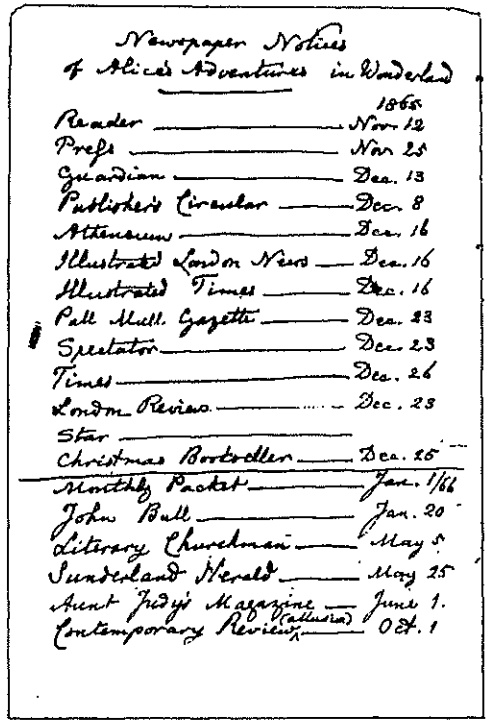
> Whatever the *commercial* consequences, we must have no more artistic 'fiascos'—and I . . . write *at once* about it by your alarming words . . . "We are going on with another 6000 *as fast as possible.*" My decision is, we must have *no more hurry.* . . . You will think me a lunatic for thus wishing to send away money from the doors; and . . . that I shall thus lose thousands of would-be purchasers, who will . . . go and buy other Christmas books. I wish I could put into words how entirely such arguments go for nothing with me. . . . The only thing I *do* care for is, that all the copies that *are* sold shall be artistically first-rate.

Macmillan tried to assuage Charles's fears by reporting that the printer "thinks he can fulfil your requirements and let us have copies so as to be on sale by January 23." On January 27, 1872, a mere seven weeks after publication, Charles wrote: "My birthday was signalized by hearing from . . . Macmillan that they have now sold 15,000 *Looking-Glasses* and have orders for 500 more."

While sales soared, Charles received thanks from friends favored with inscribed copies. Henry Kingsley wrote: "I can say . . . that your new book is the finest thing we have had since *Martin Chuzzlewit.* . . . In comparing the new *Alice* with the old, 'this is a more excellent song than the other.' It is perfectly splendid."[10]

Critical reaction was favorable, with some dissent. The *Athenaeum* (December 16) now was enthusiastic about both *Alice* and *Looking-Glass:* "It is with no mere book that we have to deal here. . . . It would be difficult to over-estimate the value of the store of hearty and healthy fun laid up for whole generations of young people by Mr. Lewis Carroll and Mr. John Tenniel in the two books. . . ." The *Globe* (December 15) pronounced that "to write good nonsense is as difficult as to write good sense, but it must be more difficult, as there are very few who deal in the commodity so successfully as Mr. Carroll." The *Examiner* (December 16) found the sequel "hardly as good" as the original but "quite good enough to delight every sensible reader of any age." It praised the "wit and humour that all children can appreciate, and grown folks ought as thoroughly to enjoy."

The *Illustrated London News* (December 16) heaped praise upon both book and author. It judged the story "quite as rich in humorous whims and fancy, quite as laughable in its queer incidents, as lovable for its pleasant



Newspaper Notices
of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

	1865
Reader	Nov. 12
Press	Nov 25
Guardian	Dec. 13
Publisher's Circular	Dec. 8
Athenaeum	Dec. 16
Illustrated London News	Dec. 16
Illustrated Times	Dec. 16
Pall Mall Gazette	Dec. 23
Spectator	Dec. 23
Times	Dec. 26
London Review	Dec. 23
Star	
Christmas Bookseller	Dec. 25
Monthly Packet	Jan. 1/66
John Bull	Jan. 20
Literary Churchman	May 5
Sunderland Herald	May 25
Aunt Judy's Magazine	June 1.
Contemporary Review (Callwins)	Oct. 1

Charles compiled this list of reviews of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland *in his diary.*

spirit and graceful manner as the wondrous tale of Alice's former adventures underground." Other rapturous reviews appeared in *Aunt Judy's Christmas Volume* for 1872, the *Saturday Review* (December 30), the *Spectator* (December 30), and elsewhere.

The two books continued to sell. A year after it first appeared, Charles rejoiced to a friend that "*Looking-Glass* is having such a tremendous sale. . . . We have sold about 25000!" By 1898, the year Charles died, Macmillan had printed over 150,000 *Wonderlands* and more than 100,000 *Looking-Glasses*.[11]

Although, as the novelist Charlotte Yonge observed, "it takes some cultivation to enjoy these wonderfully droll compositions,"[12] neither *Alice* book has ever gone out of print; both are, in fact, firm bulwarks of society, both in the English-speaking world and everywhere else. Next to the Bible and Shakespeare, they are the books most widely and most frequently translated and quoted. Over seventy-five editions and versions of the *Alice* books were available in 1993, including play texts, parodies, read-along cassettes, teachers' guides, audio-language studies, coloring books, "New Method" readers, abridgments, learn-to-read story books, single-syllable texts, coloring books, pop-up books, musical renderings, casebooks, and a deluxe edition selling for £175. They have been translated into over seventy languages, including Swahili and Yiddish; and they exist in Braille.

Not only the books but Charles's life and Alice Liddell's have come under close scrutiny and been the subjects of stage plays, films, television dramas, and ballets. Lewis Carroll societies flourish in Britain and the United States, and one has been founded in Japan. Britain's Dodo Club has more than a hundred members. Two Lewis Carroll foundations have been incorporated to advance Carroll studies, and in Daresbury, Cheshire, the Lewis Carroll Birthplace Centre has been established, an attraction not only for tourists and Carrollians but for scholars as well.

Critics have pondered the books' magic and tried to explain it. What are they all about, they ask, and why so universally successful? What is the key to their enchantment, why are they so entertaining and yet so enigmatic? What charm enables them to transcend language as well as national and temporal differences and win their way into the hearts of young and old everywhere and always?

Commenting on *Alice,* Charles himself wrote: "The 'Why?' of this book cannot, and need not, be put into words. Those for whom a child's mind is a sealed book, and who see no divinity in a child's smile, would read such words in vain. . . . No deed . . . I suppose . . . is really unselfish. Yet if one can put forth all one's powers in a task where nothing of reward is hoped for but a little child's whispered thanks and the airy touch of a little child's pure lips, one seems to come somewhere near to this."[13]

Charming as that comment is, it does not help us grasp the meaning of the books. We must go beyond Charles's reflections. The critiques, commentaries, exegeses, and analyses that have appeared during the past hundred years and more—some profound and interesting, some absurd—offer many bewildering theories. Recalling a few simple facts, however, helps.

To begin with, Charles wrote both books with Alice Liddell and, to a lesser degree, her sisters and Robinson Duckworth in mind. All the occupants of the boat who first heard the tale of Alice are characters in the first book. The Dodo is Charles, the Duck is Duckworth, the Lory is Lorina, the Eaglet Edith. But they play hardly more than walk-on parts. The book is about Alice, the middle sister; it is she, and she alone, who stands at center stage throughout.

The actors in both *Alice* books are transplants from real life, as are the episodes, and those who sat in the gliding boat recognized them as Charles related them, just as they would later experience flashes of memory upon reading *Looking-Glass*. The landmarks, the language, the puns, the puffery—it was all rooted in the circumscribed enclave of their Victorian lives. Oxford provided the landscape, its architecture, its history, its select society, its conventions. In *Under Ground* and in the additions that Charles later made to the tale and in the sequel, his listeners (and readers) would have instantly picked up on the references, to the Sheep Shop on St. Aldate's, the treacle well at Binsey, the lilies of the Botanic Gardens, the deer in Magdalen Grove, the lion and the unicorn from the royal crests, the leopards from Cardinal Wolsey's coat of arms that graces the fabric of Christ Church and are known as "Ch Ch cats." Charles parodied familiar verses and songs, some of which they sang together as they rowed up or down river: "Twinkle, twinkle, little bat"; "Salmon come up" in "The Lobster-Quadrille"; "Turtle Soup"; "How doth the little crocodile"; and more. They would readily penetrate the thin disguises of John Ruskin as the conger eel, Bartholomew Price as the Bat, Humpty Dumpty as some egghead don pontificating, the Caterpillar as another conducting a *viva*. The Mad Tea-Party as a parody of Alice's birthday party would have elicited howls of laughter. A good many of the references are lost to us, so localized they were.[14]

Looking-Glass, too, grew directly out of shared experiences with the Liddell sisters. The royal celebrations in March and June 1863 supplied the book's characters and its essential theme, Alice's trials on the road to majesty. The looking-glass would have reawakened memories of the visit to Hetton Lawn. The opening scene of Alice with the kitten in her lap would have taken them back to the bazaar in St. John's gardens, when Charles helped Alice and her sisters sell their little kittens. And then, like Princess Alexandra at the bazaar, the White Queen has her own imperial kitten. The Red Queen lecturing Alice echoes either Mrs. Liddell's or Miss Prickett's injunctions to the girls: "Look up, speak nicely, and don't twiddle your fingers all the time"; "Curtsey while you're thinking what to say"; "Open your mouth a *little* wider when you speak, and always say 'your Majesty' "; and "Speak in French when you can't think of the English for a thing—turn out your toes when you walk—and remember who you are!" On those outings from Hetton Lawn into the country, they would have noticed the patchwork design of the fields, and one of the girls or Charles might have suggested

their similarity to a chessboard. The "high wind" that blew their way as they walked across Leckhampton Hill later whistles in Alice's ears as she runs with the Red Queen through the chessboard country. The railway carriage scene reconstructs the "very merry" railway journey the girls and Charles had from Gloucester back to Oxford. The banquet at the end of the story is a replica of the one for the Prince and Princess of Wales in Hall in June 1863.

Underlying the characters, however distorted and exaggerated, is the cast-iron foundation of Victorian society, its shibboleths, class hierarchy, manners, conventions, proprieties, taboos, and, perhaps most of all, its foibles and follies. The Victorian idea—or, in Charles's terms, the misconception—of the child is at the heart of both stories, as are the child's observations of the adult world and the adult world's insensitive, abusive treatment of the child. We also have a running commentary on the human condition and especially a catalogue of human weaknesses—sliding away from rectitude, succumbing to frailties, escaping responsibilities, imagining infirmities.

Although the heroine is still young and learning, she is old enough both to reflect her training and to criticize it. She mirrors her society by showing that her sensitivity has already been blunted and that she has learned to mimic the haughty stance, the rude rebuke common in her social milieu. Her indelicate treatment of the Mouse and the birds in the early chapters of *Wonderland* are a mere prelude to the insolence and arrogance she herself encounters and criticizes. Almost everyone she meets mistreats her: the rabbit mistakes her for his housemaid and shouts orders at her, the caterpillar cross-examines her, the Duchess berates her, the Hatter criticizes the length of her locks, the March Hare lectures her on her use of language, the Gryphon chides her and tells her to hold her tongue, the Queen of Hearts shouts "Off with her head!"

Bad behavior is one thing, but violence is something else, and it too occurs in these books, some of it initiated by our heroine. Alice's fall down the rabbit hole is in itself not violent, but it certainly carries with it the fear of a violent crash. When Alice is jammed into the Rabbit's house, she kicks Bill the Lizard up the chimney like a skyrocket. Later she comes upon the scene of utter havoc in the Duchess's kitchen, where the Cook throws fire irons, saucepans, and plates at the Duchess and her baby and the Duchess in turn orders the Cook to decapitate Alice. While singing a lullaby urging punishment for sneezing, the Duchess tosses her baby "violently up and down" and then hurls it at Alice. A pigeon flies into Alice's face and beats her. The

Queen's croquet ground witnesses cruel incidents too. The company plays croquet with live flamingos for mallets and live hedgehogs for balls, the Duchess is in prison for boxing the Queen's ears, and the Queen's command to chop off various heads becomes a refrain. In *Looking-Glass,* there's the Jabberwock with jaws that bite and claws that catch, the oysters are all eaten, the Lion and the Unicorn engage in battle, and the red chess pieces are threatening.

The books reflect England's rigid social scale more than they criticize it. Charles has a good ear and captures the speech and manners of several social grades. His listeners were undoubtedly amused by his imitation of the Cockney, the parvenu, the social climber, the huffy academic. In fact, most slices of the social pie are represented, from the royals and the aristocratic Duchess to the pretentious Rabbit with his waistcoat, gloves, and watch, hobnobbing with the aristocracy, to the carpenter and the Gryphon, who favors double negatives.

The characters behave according to their stations, but a good many Victorian bromides transcend class, and Charles deals them out mercilessly. "I'm older than you, and must know better," says the Lory to Alice. When Alice asks exactly how old the Lory is, she vainly refuses to tell. Group games are the target in the Caucus-Race, with its solemn prize-giving ceremony. When the Mouse goes off in a huff after reciting its tale, the old Crab admonishes her daughter: "Ah, my dear! Let this be a lesson to you never to lose *your* temper!" Then the Caterpillar orders Alice to "keep your temper." Similar rebuffs and platitudes occur throughout.

What, then, does it all add up to besides art? The answer surely is a double-layered metaphor. The more obvious one, not much disguised, is the child's plight in Victorian upper-class society, which the Liddell sisters would easily recognize. But that same metaphor goes far beyond Charles's original purpose: it reaches beyond Victorian Oxford into the wide world. For Charles, intentionally or not, got at the universal essence of childhood and captured the disappointments, fears, and bewilderment that all children encounter in the course of daily living. He wove fear, condescension, rejection, and violence into the tales, and the children who read them feel their hearts beat faster and their skin tingle, not so much with excitement as with an uncanny recognition of themselves, of the hurdles they have confronted and had to overcome. Repelled by Alice's encounters, they are also drawn to them because they recognize them as their own. These painful and damaging experiences are the price children pay in all societies in all times when passing through the dark corridors of their young lives, and Charles miraculously captures their truth.

The second metaphor lives in Charles's own life. He could not have written about Alice's adventures had he not himself experienced the indignities that Alice suffers and the fears she feels. The *Alice* books become, in this metaphor, a record of Charles's childhood, the shocks dealt him by parents, teachers, all his elders. Bad manners and violence were commonplace in Victorian days, but their emphasis and frequency in these books, while capturing the ethos of the age, also tell us that Charles must have stored up an amount of hostility as he grew up, at home, at school, and at Oxford. At home and at school, he very likely smarted under innumerable commands from above, unreasoning and unreasonable, and as a sensitive observer, he saw and deplored society's artificial and meaningless minuets. The spare-the-rod philosophy was still dominant; whippings and beatings at school were customary. The bullying he witnessed, the knockabout games on the sporting fields, surely weighed on him. Accumulated resentment seeks outlets, and Charles took this opportunity to get even with the past.

If the Red Queen is a parody of Miss Prickett, she is also an exaggeration of someone in or near the Dodgson household in Daresbury or Croft. The metaphor holds true through both books. The Caucus-Race is a parody of games at Richmond and Rugby. The conversation between the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, in its absurd, lethargic silliness, captures the essence of a conversation between intimate adults, perhaps between two dim-witted parsons or between two fossilized Oxford dons. And Alice's exchanges with both the Caterpillar and Humpty Dumpty parody academic pomposities.

In the end, however, the books are not mainly about fear and bewilderment. Once readers have associated with Alice and wandered with her through Wonderland, they are together on a survival course. They are thrown back upon their own inner resources, determining whether their resources are strong enough to get them through. Does Alice have the wit necessary to master the maze of childhood and emerge a tried and tested teenager? Charles's answer is affirmative. He endows his heroine, and by extension all children, with the means of dealing with a hostile, unpredictable environment. At the close of both books, we have a catharsis, an affirmation of life after Wonderland and life on this side of the looking-glass. Although unconventional, the endings are happy, as fairy-tale endings should be. In both cases, Alice should meet a strong male rescuer, a Prince Charming, and they should fall in love and live happily ever after. But she does not. She succeeds, but not through the formula of grand romance. Instead of honeyed happiness, she gains confidence, a way of dealing with the world; instead of

love, she finds advancement, recognition, acceptance. It is a reasonably happy ending for Charles himself, for he is at the heart of the tales.

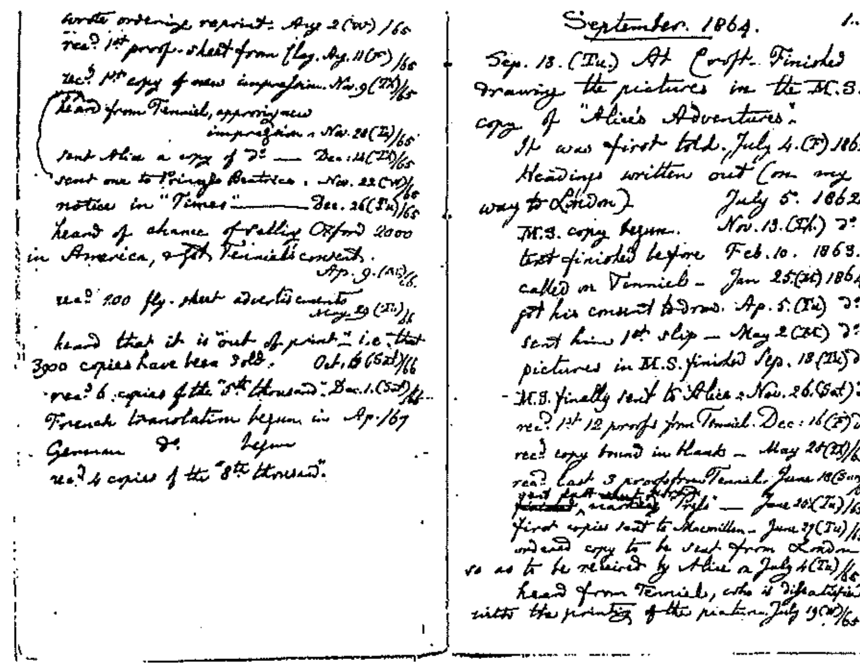
The *Alice* books affect all children of all places at all times in a similar way. They tell the child that someone does understand; they offer encouragement, a feeling that the author is sharing their miseries and is holding out a hand, a hope for their survival as they pass from childhood into adulthood.

But this discussion sounds too serious, really, because Charles's most successful device is laughter. Anyone who abhors a pun does not appreciate its usefulness as a tool to exercise the mind, to urge the growing child to wed sense to sound. Charles Dodgson, like Charles Lamb, knew the worth of the pun even as he valued many other forms of humor, not only as educational tools but as elements that offer relief from the ordinary, the arduous, the boring. When, in reading the *Alice* books, the child sees and gets the pun or some other joke all on his or her own, the child suddenly senses an awakening pride in his or her ability and, at least for a moment, laughter replaces a troubled emotion.

Many of the critiques of the *Alice* books seem to have been written by people who seldom laugh. If so, they cannot come to grips with these books, where the jests, the shattered shams, the punctured pretenses, and the peals of laughter are essential elements to understanding and enjoying. What child, young or old, can resist the Mock Turtle's account of his schooldays, where they learn the different branches of Arithmetic: Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision? Or his description of the subjects he and others studied when young: "Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with. . . . Mystery, ancient and modern, with Seaography: then Drawling—the Drawling-master . . . taught us Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils." And the Classical master taught them Laughing and Grief. Those seabed lessons, everyone knows, took ten hours the first day and nine the next, and so on: how could they be called lessons if they did not lessen from day to day?

Such entertaining stuff is a balm for whatever ails us. Education at the bottom of the sea is as funny today as it was in 1866, and it will continue to amuse for centuries to come because it appeals to something basic—our sense of the ridiculous, our yearning for relief from seriousness, our preference for fun.

Charles's juvenilia record how the Dodgson children took refuge in puns and parodies, concocting absurdities to escape their elders' impositions. The *Alice* books provide an avenue of escape from the child's burdens.


September 1864. 1.
Sep. 13. (Tu.) At Croft. Finished drawing the pictures in the M.S. copy of "Alice's Adventures."
It was first told, July 4. (F) 1862
Headings written out (on my way to London) July 5. 1862.
M.S. copy begun. Nov. 13. (Th.) Do
text finished before Feb. 10. 1863.
called on Tenniel – Jan 25. (M) 1864
got his consent to draw. Ap. 5. (Tu) Do
sent him 1st slip – May 2 (M) Do
pictures in M.S. finished Sep. 13 (Tu) Do
M.S. finally sent to Alice – Nov. 26. (Sat) Do
recd 1st 12 proofs from Tenniel. Dec: 16 (F) Do
recd copy bound in blank – May 26 (F)/65
recd last 3 proofs from Tenniel. June 18 (Sun)/65
sent both ... "Proofs" — June 20 (Tu)/65
first copies sent to Macmillan – June 27 (Tu)/65
ordered copy to be sent from London so as to be received by Alice on July 4 (Tu)/65
heard from Tenniel, who is dissatisfied with the printing of the pictures. July 19 (W)/65
wrote ordering reprint. Aug 2 (W) /65
recd 1st proof-sheet from Clay. Aug. 11 (F) /65
recd 1st copy of new impression. Nov. 9 (Th)/65
heard from Tenniel, approving new impression. Nov. 20 (M)/65
sent Alice a copy of Do — Dec. 14 (Th)/65
sent one to Princess Beatrice. Nov. 22 (W)/65
notice in "Times" — Dec. 26 (Tu)/65
heard of chance of selling Oxford 2000 in America, with Tenniel's consent. Ap. 9. (M)/66.
recd 100 fly-sheet advertisements May 29 (Tu)/66
heard that it is "out of print," i.e. that 3000 copies have been sold. Oct. 6 (Sat)/66
recd 6 copies of the "5th thousand." Dec. 1. (Sat)/66
French translation begun in Ap./67
German Do begun
recd 4 copies of the "8th thousand."

Calendar of events connected with composing and publishing Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, *also entered in Charles's diary*

Finally, one must ask again why these books have become such widely read classics while other children's books that were, in their time, equally popular—books by such famous authors as Catherine Sinclair, Mrs. Margaret Gatty, Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, and Christina Rossetti—are no longer read and have largely perished.

Children's books had existed for centuries before Charles came along. He did not invent the genre. But he did something significant. He broke with tradition. Many of the earlier children's books written for the upper classes had lofty purposes: they had to teach and preach. Primers taught children religious principles alongside multiplication tables. Children recited rhymed couplets as aids to memorizing the alphabet—*A:* "In Adam's fall we sinned all"; *F:* "The idle Fool is whipped at school." Children learned their cate-

chism, learned to pray, learned to fear sin—and their books were meant to aid and abet the process. They were often frightened by warnings and threats, their waking hours burdened with homilies. Much of the children's literature of Charles's day, the books he himself read as a boy, were purposeful and dour. They instilled discipline and compliance.

The prose of children's books before *Alice* was also formularized. Most earlier writers (contemporaries and later writers too) wrote down and condescended to children. They rarely gave the young credit for much intelligence, let alone sensitivity or imagination. The sentiment was heavy, often couched in purple prose. The language tended to be monosyllabic and dull. The Puritan tradition forbade anything lighthearted. Growing up was a serious affair, and the devil had his pitchfork ready, waiting to lead the child into evil ways.

The *Alice* books fly in the face of that tradition, destroy it, and give the Victorian child something lighter and brighter. Above all, these books have no moral. About a year after *Wonderland* appeared, when Charles sent a more conventional children's book to a young friend, he wrote (January 5, 1867): "The book is intended for you to look at the outside, and then put it away in the bookcase: the *inside* is not meant to be read. The book has got a moral—so I need hardly say it is *not* by Lewis Carroll." He was fed up with all the moral baggage that burdened children, that perhaps he himself had struggled with when a boy, and he was not purveying any more. Not only not purveying it—he went further and parodied the entire practice of adult moralizing. In chapter 9 of *Wonderland:* Alice "was a little startled when she heard . . . [the Duchess's] voice close to her ear. 'You're thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I can't tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit.' 'Perhaps it hasn't one,' Alice ventured to remark. 'Tut, tut, child!' said the Duchess. 'Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it.' "

Charles's prose is also unconventional. He uses big, polysyllabic words, sophisticated concepts, notions that a child cannot possibly be expected to grasp. But he embeds these words in a string of adventures that a child can follow easily. If the child is engrossed in the story, he or she is provoked to ask questions about the difficult words and concepts. If an adult is reading the story to the child, the child might interrupt and ask, even as early as the first chapter of *Alice,* "What's that word mean, Mummy, what's *antipathies?*" The parent might suggest that the child look up the word in a dictionary, hinting at a good learning habit. Or in the case of *antipathies,* the intelligent

reader might introduce the child to double meanings and the concept of similar-sounding words.

What do the *Alice* books mean? everyone asks. To understand what they mean, we have to realize that Wonderland and the world behind the looking-glass are mysterious places where characters do not live by conventional rules and that meaning does not play a conventional role. Even the laws of nature, the law of gravity for instance, do not work as they should. But, for Charles, meaning is only one quality that words possess, and why, he implies, is meaning so important? To put it another way, is the meaning of a word really the most important thing about it? After all, words make sounds, and perhaps the sound of a word, like music without words, has a role to play, perhaps an even more important role than meaning. That is the point: the sound of words, like music, makes us feel. Sound and feeling, in these books, are as important as, perhaps even more important than, sense and meaning. The sounds help us associate with Alice and her adventures. The reader feels along with Alice throughout her wanderings, and those feelings are the most important part of the journey. The sound of words and the feelings they provoke emerge as a new phenomenon in children's books, thanks to Lewis Carroll. It is not surprising that James Joyce knew the *Alice* books well.

Charles's language suits the mood and contributes a good deal to the piece. He is a genius at double meanings, at playing games with words, and he challenges every child who picks up the book to play the game with him. And when the child catches Charles's second meaning (" 'We called him Tortoise because he taught us' "), the child experiences a sense of satisfaction unparalleled elsewhere. The child has played the game right and can share a private joke with the author.

By banishing seriousness, Charles turns the tables on the old, menacing books proffered to children. Although the characters in the *Alice* books take themselves seriously, no child reader is meant to do so. The language the characters use, the games they play, the lives they lead—all evoke mirth and laughter, at least from the child's point of view. The Rabbit, the Duchess, the Queen of Hearts, the Hatter, and the White Knight are all figures of fun.

Perhaps the most important difference between the *Alice* books and more conventional children's stories of mid-Victorian Britain is a difference in the author's attitude toward his audience. For a middle- and upper-class child, growing up in Victorian times may have been something less than a happy experience. It was an age of the nanny and the governess; children were

shunted off to the nursery, brought out to spend an hour with their mothers in the late afternoon, and then whisked off again. When they reached school age, they were packed off to preparatory and then public schools, where they learned to fear schoolmasters and mistresses and, even more, one another. School was too often the arena of the bully: violence was rampant. To survive at the English boarding school, one had to be strong and resourceful enough to outwit one's classmates.

By a magical combination of memory and intuition, Charles keenly appreciated what it was like to be a child in a grown-up society, what it meant to be scolded, rejected, ordered about. The *Alice* books are antidotes to the child's degradation. Like Dickens, Charles knew that when harsh reality becomes unbearable, the child seeks escape through fantasy. Charles also knew how to make the adult reader sympathize with the child Alice, the victim of the unpredictable, undependable world of adults into which she has accidentally fallen. Charles champions the child in the child's confrontation with the adult world, and in that, too, his book differs from most others. He treats children, both in his book and in real life, as equals. He has a way of seeing into their minds and hearts, and he knows how to train their minds painlessly and move their hearts constructively. As an adult, he devotes more of his time, money, and energy to doing things for children than to anything else.

The theme of survival echoes all through Charles's work, just as it is a major concern in his life. If the *Alice* books are symbols of his own struggle to survive, they are also formulae for every child's survival: they offer encouragement to push on, messages of hope in the wilderness of adult society. Time and again Charles articulates that message, through his works and in his personal relationships. Ethel Rowell, a child friend, recorded her debt to him for teaching her logic and for compelling her "to that arduous business of thinking." And she added: "He gave me a sense of my own personal dignity. He was so punctilious, so courteous, so considerate, so scrupulous not to embarrass or offend, that he made me feel I counted."[15]

Charles's devotion to children and their plight are at the heart of the *Alice* books. They are his way of embracing and comforting the child. He first tells the tale in order to entertain three real children, then he publishes it to make the world of children a bit happier. In a letter to the father of one of his child friends, he wrote (January 31, 1877): "The pleasantest thought I have, connected with *Alice*, is that she has given real and innocent pleasure to children."

The element of respect and the absence of condescension are crucial, and

Charles's acceptance of the child as an equal makes all the difference, for it is these components that render the books timeless. Despite the Victorian furniture built into the tales, they do today for young people what they did for Ethel Rowell and other Victorian children. A seventeen-year-old student of mine confirmed this notion, writing in a paper on nineteenth-century fantasy: "Lewis Carroll gives equal time to the child's point of view. He makes fun of the adult world and understands all the hurt feelings that most children suffer while they are caught in the condition of growing up but are still small. I find myself constantly identifying with Alice as I move through this bewildering world of ours. The *Alice* books help the child develop self-awareness and assure her that she is not the only one feeling what she feels. Maybe they even show adults how to be more aware of the child and the needs of children. They really made it easier for me to grow up."

Charles does not play jokes on children—he shares jokes with them and, in doing so, gives them the self-confidence they need, the extra boost to make them take another step forward in the often precarious process of leaving childhood and entering adulthood. Along the road he makes them laugh without requiring them to pay for their laughter.

Even today the formula works: Charles helps children see themselves anew and to like what they see. That is why the *Alice* books have been translated into practically every language that children speak and why Charles commands an audience in every new generation.

But how did he come to understand the child and the predicament of childhood? Well, we have come full circle. If we look back to the family hearth at Croft, we see a highly sensitive eldest son growing up in surroundings that make enormous demands upon him. The heroine of the two books is modeled on Alice Liddell, but she and her adventures would not have materialized had the boy Charles Dodgson not earlier lived through those trials and adventures.