THE STORY OF
ALICE

Lewis Carroll
and the Secret History
of Wonderland

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An anecdote included in Collingwood's *Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* reveals how Carroll's mixture of curiosity and persistence could work in practice. One day he approached his father with a book of logarithms and asked him, 'Please explain.' When his father told him 'he was much too young to understand anything about such a difficult subject', Carroll's response was simply to repeat himself more insistently: '*But*, please explain!' 'But' was an important word for Carroll; in *The Rectory Magazine*, he included a short piece entitled 'But' that pointed out how many fantasies we could live out were it not for 'the all-potent influence' of the 'little monosyllable' that made them vanish: 'I *would* have every pleasure and convenience that wealth can give, *but* – I can't!' However, such forensic examination of ordinary expressions was unlikely to make him popular at school, where his teachers were more used to asking questions than answering them, and his reports from Richmond School, a religiously orthodox establishment some ten miles away from Croft that he attended from the ages of twelve to fourteen, are tellingly muted. Although a surviving letter to Carroll's father from the headmaster James Tate anticipates a 'bright career' for his son, praising his 'very uncommon share of genius', the same letter also suggests that he should not be encouraged to feel 'his superiority over other boys'. If this indicates that Carroll impressed his teachers without endearing himself to them – and in his praise of Carroll's 'love of precise argument' Tate certainly sounds like someone speaking through gritted teeth – one can only imagine what the 'other boys' thought. Schoolchildren are rarely impressed by genius when it announces itself in their ranks, and a Victorian public school, with its emphasis on discipline and rote learning, was hardly the sort of environment in which it could develop freely. Yet the

options for an ambitious middle-class family were limited, and accordingly on 27 January 1846 Carroll entered Rugby School as a boarder. It was his fourteenth birthday, and it may be that his experiences there influenced his later dislike of the date; he greatly preferred the other 364 days of the year that were available for 'unbirthday' celebrations, because the next few years were not especially happy.

In theory, Rugby was a good choice of school for a boy like Carroll. Later in the century, it would be expanded by the architect William Butterfield into a sprawling pile of polychromatic brickwork, featuring spiky turrets and a grand echoing chapel, like a scene from a Gothic novel rewritten by John Ruskin, but in 1846 it was still a comparatively modest educational establishment. Over the previous two decades, largely thanks to the reforming zeal of Thomas Arnold, it had earned a reputation as a place where education and religion were taken equally seriously. The current headmaster, Archibald Tait, had taken over after Arnold died in 1842. Although he was a rather remote figure, who was reluctant to punish his pupils (one boy who escaped and was later found riding on a circus elephant received only a stern reprimand), and undoubtedly lacked his famous predecessor's charisma – a modern history of the school discusses his eight-year tenure in a chapter entitled 'A Parenthesis' – he had continued Arnold's reforms. Mathematics, history and modern languages were taught alongside the standard works of classical literature, and the more creative pupils were encouraged to experiment in their own writing. The month after Carroll arrived, he would have seen February's issue of *The Rugby Miscellany*, a 32-page magazine written by the older pupils, which opened with an editorial urging 'the necessity of intellectual exertion' and continued with imitations of Tennyson, a rather shrill critical essay on Wordsworth ('His faults are, I believe, many and great') and a nostalgia-rich article on 'The Last Year in the Sixth'. However, in the same issue Carroll would also have read 'A Tale Without a Name', a Byronic pastiche that deals with the experiences of a new boy at Rugby, and the events recounted there, especially the 'constant din' of the dormitories, might have made him more uneasy.

Like most Victorian public schools, Rugby's boarding houses encouraged

pupils to form tight, self-regulating societies where the older and stronger boys were expected to keep the younger and weaker in line. It was a system that promoted fierce loyalties and passionate male friendships – *The Rugby Miscellany* includes a surprisingly frank poem on 'love's ecstatic dream, | More dear than love of woman' – but the consequences could be brutal, like a Victorian version of *The Lord of the Flies* with sharpened sticks replaced by swishing canes. When the novelist Anthony Trollope looked back on his time at Winchester, he recalled one older boy who made his life a particular misery when he decided that the best way of keeping up house morale would be to thrash Trollope 'as a part of his daily exercise'. He was Trollope's brother. Despite the atmosphere of moral earnestness Arnold had cultivated, Rugby still had its share of abuses: a boy who arrived at School House in 1849, the year when Carroll left, recalled other pupils 'coming into my study pulling all my books about and preventing my learning by asking me to repeat the most horrid words'; he also endured the annual ceremony of 'Lamb-Singing', in which new boys were forced to stand on a table and perform in front of the rest of the house, before having to drink a jug of 'muddy water crammed with salt', which left his throat feeling 'as if it had been skinned'.

Carroll may not have submitted meekly to such ordeals. At Richmond School he was remembered as 'a boy who knew well how to use his fists', and in one of his letters home from Richmond he described his rough initiation ('they immediately began kicking me and knocking on all sides') before concluding that 'The boys play me no tricks now' – a piece of reassurance that carried a little glint of menace. His earliest surviving letter from Rugby is equally upbeat, or at least dutifully cheerful, containing a request for some money to buy a pair of 'warm gloves', and the news that another boy 'unfortunately broke his arm yesterday by falling down'. Academically he was successful, and although his schoolbooks show that he was a conscientious pupil – his 1845 copy of Virgil contains hundreds of neat underlinings and marginal comments – it was in mathematics, where he won five school prizes, that he really shone.

Later in life, Carroll would show off his skill with numbers, publishing

an article in 1887 that explained how to find the day of the week for any given date in history, but there is no evidence that he was a mathematical prodigy like the earlier phenomenon of the 'calculating boys': autistic savants like Jedediah Buxton, who could tell you exactly how many words a sermon contained after hearing it just once, despite having no idea what it was about. Even if he could have performed this sort of trick, Carroll would never have contemplated treating either mathematics or religion as material for a parlour game. They were too important for that; both were subjects for thinking with as well as thinking about. One of his father's sermons had pointed out that everyone will have 'an account to render hereafter', and for Carroll the overlap of vocabulary between religion and mathematics revealed a good deal of intellectual common ground. Neither left any room for ambiguity or doubt; both involved what Carroll described in one of his later letters as 'an absolute, self-existent, external, distinction between Right and Wrong'.

If religion helped to make sense of the invisible world, mathematics made sense of what Carroll saw all around him. One of his 'Skeleton Maps' featured a set of tidy dotted lines showing his father's travels around Britain, and it is no coincidence that Carroll tried to find equally soothing patterns in his own life. At Christ Church he ended up spending around half of the year living in a set of quadrangles, and the rest of his time tracing out a series of triangles and parallelograms as he travelled from Oxford to London to Croft and back to Oxford, or from Croft to Ripon (where his father was Examining Chaplain to the Bishop) to London to Oxford and finally back to Croft. His photograph albums would later reveal an equal pleasure in rearranging the world as a series of neat geometrical shapes: squares, rectangles, semicircles and ovals. Mathematics revealed another fixed order underpinning the shifting surfaces of life.

It also generated stories. Some were disguised as academic exercises; one of the textbooks Carroll used at Rugby, an arithmetic primer entitled *The Tutor's Assistant*, included dozens of questions intended to help with basic calculations, which in just a few lines sketched out narrative scenarios that at first glance oddly resemble the openings of parables or fairy tales:

A captain and 160 sailors took a prize worth 1360 l. of which the captain had half for his share, and the rest was equally divided among the sailors . . .

A lady's fortune consisted of a cabinet worth 200 l. consisting of 16 drawers, each having two partitions, each of which contained 37 l. and 2 crowns . . .

A young man received 210 l. which was ⅔ of his elder brother's portion . . .

Mathematics also gave Carroll new opportunities to play around with private jokes and examples of magical thinking. He remained addicted to the number forty-two, for example, which long before Douglas Adams selected it as the answer to 'life, the universe, and everything' was making numerous guest appearances in Carroll's stories. Sometimes these were obvious: in the courtroom scene in Wonderland, the King claims that 'Rule Forty-two' is '*All persons more than a mile high to leave the court*', and in *The Hunting of the Snark* another Rule Forty-two states that 'No one shall speak to the Man at the Helm', while the Baker has 'forty-two boxes, all carefully packed | With his name painted clearly on each.' At times these appearances were more covert: there are forty-two illustrations in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, for example, and the trial title pages Carroll's publisher Macmillan printed for him reveal that he originally wanted forty-two illustrations for *Through the Looking-Glass*. Meaningless in itself, but packed with private significance, it was a number that offered further tantalizing glimpses of a hidden structure at the heart of things.

What Carroll was also forced to recognize at school, however, is that not every difficulty could be resolved as neatly as a mathematical problem. Whereas his brother Wilfred was a 'keen sportsman' who 'achieved distinction as an oarsman' and was 'one of the best shots of his day', the kind of sports Carroll enjoyed, such as croquet, involved calculating angles and vectors rather than smashing into other boys, and these were not likely to make him popular at the school that had invented the modern game of rugby

football. Violet Dodgson is probably right to claim that her uncle 'worked hard and avoided games as far as possible'. What he couldn't avoid was the ritual humiliation of being the sort of boy who ends up being picked last for a football team, or is told to field on the cricket boundary so that he can be kept away from the ball. Evidence that he was thought of as something other than a sporting idol comes from another school textbook, this time a copy of Xenophon he acquired in November 1846, in which he wrote his name and another hand added 'is a muff', before repeating the insult at the top of the page: 'Dodgson is a muff.' The word's general meaning of 'A foolish, stupid, feeble, or incompetent person' was sharpened in school contexts to mean the sort of boy who was clumsy or inept at sports (a 'muff' also referred to a dropped catch at cricket), and it could be deployed in either an affectionate or a more hostile manner. In Thomas Hughes's 1857 novel *Tom Brown's School Days*, written in celebration of his time at Rugby under Arnold, Bill the porter is fondly chaffed as an 'old muff,' while the delicate new boy Arthur is openly laughed at as a 'young muff'. In fiction, of course, young muffs like Arthur were usually protected by stout-hearted heroes like Tom Brown, who saves him from the bullies and then follows Arthur's saintly example by saying his prayers every night beside his dormitory bed. The reality was usually far less reassuring. Another delicate new boy, this time a real one, left a full diary of the months he spent at Rugby before his early death, and it makes unhappy reading. Entering the school on 28 August 1846, seven months after Carroll, John Lang Bickersteth was not only frail and good at mathematics, but also remarkably pious – one of his diary entries reads 'A man buried today – a warning to me' – and he suffered accordingly. Sad and friendless from the start, he was accused of being 'mean and stingy' for not buying any pictures for his study, and was teased mercilessly by the other boys. During one especially bleak evening, he had a dog repeatedly set on him. By mid-September, his diary had collapsed into exclamations such as 'O God, sustain me!' and by the end of the following January he had died at home from a fever.

There is no evidence that Carroll suffered as badly as this, but as an adult his references to Rugby were few and cool in tone, stating only that no 'earthly considerations would induce me to go through my three years

again', and 'the hardships of the day would have been comparative trifles to bear' if only he had been 'secure from annoyance at night'. There was no shortage of possible 'annoyances' in a shared dormitory. Collingwood notes that the older pupils would sometimes remove the blankets of the younger ones, leaving them to shiver through the night, while blankets also featured in a popular form of torture that involved tossing the smaller boys up in the air and letting them fall to the ground. (In *Tom Brown's School Days* this is a favourite pastime of Flashman, the school's chief bully, who also enjoys roasting boys in front of the fire like chestnuts.) However, the text Carroll probably had in mind is *Paradise Lost*, which describes Adam and Eve 'asleep secure of [i.e. safe from] harm' before Satan tempts them and they fall. Did Carroll experience something similar? Rugby's dormitories were certainly known as places where sexual activity took place; a history of the school published in 1856 included an oblique reference to 'petty perversions', which could mean anything from masturbation to full-blown affairs. For some boys, sexual knowledge could be just as traumatic as actual sexual activity: the chapter on 'Dormitory Life' in F. W. Farrar's popular schoolboy tale *Eric; or, Little by Little* (1858) describes an evening of fun that starts with a game of leap-frog, but quickly descends to 'indecent talk', leaving one boy, who urges his friends to stop, feeling 'as if I was trampling on a slimy poisonous adder'. In case the metaphor is not sufficiently clear, Farrar explains that another boy listens in on the smutty conversations and becomes 'a "god, knowing good and evil"' – another Adam who falls because of the temptations of a snake-like creature.

Whatever Carroll overheard or witnessed at Rugby, it appears to have confirmed his sense that innocence was a special preserve of childhood that was constantly in danger of being breached. Once that occurred it was gone for ever: childhood was a paradise with gates that all too easily swung shut and locked behind you. Only in a story like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* could they be reopened a crack, as Alice glimpses 'bright flowers' and 'cool fountains' at the end of a dark passage, and then shrinks even smaller to enter 'the loveliest garden you ever saw'.

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