

Essays

Lewis Carroll and a Child's Imagination

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This year marks the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known by his pen name of Lewis Carroll. While Carroll published many works, Alice stands out among literary circles. Could it be for the words it gave to the English language such as "jabberwocky" or "chortle"? Perhaps it is the fact that so many of the Wonderland characters have become archetypes on their own. The names "The Mad Hatter," "Cheshire Cat," "White Rabbit," and "Tweedles Dum and Dee" carry weight in a conversation.

Before Alice became a scholar's gold mine and the topic of global seminars, however, the book was simply an adventure story for children. While Carroll may have been using the perception of an innocent child to point out flaws in society as a kind of secret message to parents reading to their sons and daughters, the narrative celebrates first and foremost the endless imagination of children. Unlike Tolkien's fantasy, this world relies solely on dream logic which does not require the consistency of a world that keeps track of the limits of Gandalf or the orks. Nothing in Wonderland needs to make sense to adults. Without the boundaries of the dreary world of physics and consistency, a child can eat a sweet and instantly shrink small enough to fit through a keyhole. And what a magical world is one in which we can ask the flowers and caterpillars what they think!

Earlier this year, in "Lewis Carroll's Dream-child and Victorian Child Psychopathology" (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 76.1 [Jan 2015]), Stephanie L. Schatz made a connection between *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which first appeared in 1865, and another work published five years earlier. In 1860, psychiatrist Sir James Crichton-Browne published an essay, "Psychological Diseases in Early Life," which defined a child's imagination as the beginning of delusion. The innocent act of "castle-building" was thought to be a cause of distortion of reality in adults. As a result, the field of developmental psychology began to emerge in the late nineteenth century. Since Lewis Carroll was one who kept up with medical publications, he may have written *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with nonsense and dream logic to make a point: a child's imagination is something to be fiercely defended and even admired.

Lewis Carroll, who was raised in a large house in York, England, was the third of eleven children. Although he was not destined to have offspring of his own, he developed a close bond with the children of Henry Liddell, an Oxford dean. Alice was the youngest of the Liddell girls, but all three were enamored of Carroll's story-telling abilities. Alice as an adult fondly remembered how Carroll would sit next to them on a bench and tell them stories which he made up as he went along. He'd have paper on his lap to illustrate the impromptu narrative.

The publication of *Alice* was followed by the appearance of J. M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* in 1904 and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* in 1905. Both books clearly affirm the creativity of children and use dream logic as an escape from mundane lives of responsibility and sensibility. Carroll's first publication under his famous pseudonym was a poem called "Solitude," which may have been inspired by the long walks he was reported to have taken every day on his own. In this work the speaker makes somber comments on the purity of nature. Mourning for a childhood that is gone forever, he

expresses longing for one more day as a child running carefree through meadows. Perhaps that is why he felt close to the Liddell girls. There was still so much fun to be had. Adults who remember the magic of childhood and fight to preserve it in the face of encroaching science, politics and discord should be celebrated. And so, thanks to writers from Lewis Carroll, J. M. Barrie, and Frances Burnett to our modern Dr. Seuss, Neil Gaiman, and Julia Donaldson, the feral imagination of the child remains untamed on our children's bookshelves.

Welsh Town Celebrates *Alice*

Alice Liddell and her family owned a summer home, built in 1862, in North Wales, and the story is that Lewis Carroll once visited the family there, getting ideas for *Alice in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass*. A cave



behind the home was called the Rabbit Hole, because it covered



a mine entrance. Two large rocks jutting up from the bay were called the Walrus and the Carpenter. After the Liddells moved



out, their home was turned into the Penmorfa Hotel, which remained in existence until it was demolished in 2008. The home/hotel is gone, but there is still plenty of evidence of the area's devotion to the *Alice* stories, as the accompanying photos demonstrate. There's another one on the back cover.

Photos by Dani Adair-Stirling