



The Alice Behind Wonderland

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On a summer's day in 1858, in a garden behind Christ Church College in Oxford, Charles Dodgson, a lecturer in mathematics, photographed six-year-old Alice Liddell, the daughter of the college dean, with a Thomas Ottewill Registered Double Folding camera, recently purchased in London.

Simon Winchester deftly uses the resulting image--as unsettling as it is famous, and the subject of bottomless speculation--as the vehicle for a brief excursion behind the lens, a focal point on the origins of a classic work of English literature. Dodgson's love of photography framed his view of the world, and was partly responsible for transforming a shy and half-deaf mathematician into one of the world's best-loved observers of childhood. Little wonder that there is more to "Alice Liddell as the Beggar Maid" than meets the eye. Using Dodgson's published writings, private diaries, and of course his photographic portraits, Winchester gently exposes the development of Lewis Carroll and the making of his Alice.

The Alice Behind Wonderland Details

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Terry says

If this was written by one of my students, I might put "Erm, a bit...overwritten" in the margins. Ha. Winchester is quite a delightful and erudite writer and I enjoyed his voice. I think this book very clearly takes A Side and sticks with it and either ignores or dismisses any criticism of a figure Winchester obviously finds completely sympathetic. Hmm. I read DeSalvo's biography of Virginia Woolf which talked at some length about British/Victorian attitudes toward children and it quite ruined me for thinking that an adult's passionate interest in a child is just whimsy or kindness or an appreciation of "innocence", so that is a lens through which I look at Victorian-era attitudes toward children. Thus, I found this book, while in one way a pleasure to read, also...problematic. I would definitely not recommend anyone think Winchester's word is the final or best one. Edited to add: It is ridiculous to write a book referencing numerous photographs and not include them in the book. Either don't mention them, or include them, but don't try to describe them to the reader. It's just frustrating and aims attention at a shortcoming rather than being informative or enriching.

Joe says

This is the first of Winchester's books I've read that has really disappointed me.

Winchester is known for picking an event and exploring it exhaustively, showing the circumstances that led up to the event, and its repercussions. His books about natural disasters (Krakatoa, the San Francisco Earthquake) are among his best; his analysis in these explores both human and scientific (specifically geological) sides, and balances them really well.

This book has none of that. His writing style is there; it flows easily... but that's all there is.

From the title, one expects a biography of Alice Liddell, focussing on her relationship with Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll). What one gets is a very brief summary of Dodgson's life, focussing on his hobby of portrait photography. This is something I'd have expected to have been excellent; it's just the sort of overlooked tale he handled so masterfully in "The Professor and the Madman".

But here, we only get a few lyrical descriptions of the photos -- the only one reproduced in the entire book is the one on the front cover. The others are impossible to evaluate, since we don't get to see them.

He mentions -- in the most circumspect possible terms -- the speculation that Dodgson may have been a pedophile, but dismisses it with a paraphrase of a conclusion of one of Dodgson's biographers (if I got anything out of this book at all, it's a desire to read Karoline Leach's biography of Dodgson). He mentions the cooling of the relationship between Dodgson and the Liddell family, without really discussing it at all.

Meh.

Malcolm says

About twice as long as it needed to be (ie more an article worthy topic) but did find the history of photography / cameras and their use interesting.

Shawn Thrasher says

Disappointing - from the title, I thought I was going to be reading a book about Alice Liddell, her relationship with Charles Dodgson, Lewis Carroll, the books, and what happened afterwards (which from little I have read before is an interesting story). Instead, this is sort of a history of the beginnings of Victorian photography as art and science and its relationship with Charles Dodgson. Maybe if that is what I had wanted to read I might have liked this a bit more. But it wasn't, and I didn't.

Joshua says

An interesting small piece. More of an expanded magazine work than his usual more developed books. It's a perfect read for an afternoon when you want to be educated and entertained but perhaps don't want the commitment of starting a longer book. I wish I had saved this for an international flight.

Chris says

A century and a half ago, in July 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published in a limited edition by Oxford University Press -- and then immediately withdrawn because Tenniel was dissatisfied with the reproduction of his illustrations. Although it wasn't until November 1865 that the second edition appeared (approved by both author and illustrator, this time under the Macmillan imprint which had published Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* two years before) be prepared for a slew of media trumpeting and Wonderland brouhaha this summer. Nevertheless, it's an opportune moment to review this short study of Alice Liddell, the inspiration behind Lewis Carroll's two most famous fantasies.

Simon Winchester structures his discussion around a photograph that Dodgson took in 1858 of the five-year-old Alice Liddell, taking as subject Tennyson's 1842 poem *The Beggar Maid*. In this the legendary North African king Cophetua has no interest in women until he spots the young Penelophon begging in the street outside his palace. "Her arms across her breast she laid," recounts the poet; she is "more fair than words can say ... She is more beautiful than day." Cophetua swears that this dark-haired beggar maid, bare-footed, in poor attire, with "so sweet a face, such angel grace" shall be his queen. Dodgson's portrait of Alice captures all this, but with what to us now seems a degree of impropriety, both as regards her age and her unexpected décolletage. Of his attitude to his favourite "child-friend" there has been no end of gossip but precious few facts, especially as key pages in his diary were removed after his death, and I don't want to add to the wealth of uninformed speculation. Not least of these is the implicit parallel between a king's infatuation for a beggar-maid and a college lecturer's obsession with a prepubescent girl.

The author explores a bit of this, but not before he outlines Dodgson's upbringing and education, his penchant for nonsense writing, his enthusiastic involvement with the new 'black art' and his first meeting

with Alice, daughter of the Dean of Christ Church College, on the occasion of Dodgson's first foray with his newly acquired camera into the deanery garden. Winchester, a former geologist before he migrated to investigative journalism and then writing, expertly discusses the science of early photography and Dodgson's rapidly specialising in portraiture. By chapter six (of just seven chapters in this book) he finally gets to the heart of the matter in "A Portrait most Perfect and Chaste" when he discusses Dodgson's relationships with the Liddell family.

The Dean, of course, was supportive of Dodgson's use of the deanery garden for portraits. Mrs Lorina Liddell was nearer in age to the photographer and by most accounts got on well with him. Dodgson was later said to be "paying court" to the children's governess, Miss Prickett, but his diary entries apparently suggest that this is not a credible theory. Harry, the only boy in the family, hero-worshipped Dodgson. Edith, the youngest girl, was a redhead "with a Pre-Raphaelite look that Dodgson might have found less attractive" than the darker look of the others in the family, Winchester suggests. Lorina -- Ina, as the eldest of the three sisters was known -- is also linked with the young man as a potential spouse, though marriage would have meant him relinquishing his *studentship* (as Christ Church fellowships were known).

When it comes to the middle girl, Winchester notes that "Alice Pleasance Liddell was peculiarly and particularly special to Charles Dodgson;" his "interest in small girls -- he photographed scores of them, and a significant number of them nude -- fascinates many in today's more exposed world." But he notes that Victorian attitudes held that young children "were the literal embodiment of innocent beauty, an innocence to be preserved and revered. All surviving evidence suggests that Dodgson's attitude was no different and that his interest in the Liddell girls during their prepubescent years was unremarkable, in every sense of the word." I tend to agree -- after all, in *The Water-Babies* (1863) Tom the former climbing boy spends most of the book as a totally naked child, echoing William Blake's earlier *Songs of Innocence* -- and perhaps it was only with the advent of photography, where real individuals might be identifiable and gazed upon, that candid portraits and adult interest in them became suspect. Winchester doesn't however pursue this line of thinking.

If, as Winchester suggests, The Beggar Maid study was taken in June 1857, then it wasn't till Alice was ten, in July 1862, that the famous "golden afternoon" boating trip resulted in an extempore tale becoming one of the best-known children's classics. But by 1865 Alice was on the way to that difficult age that Dodgson found difficult to deal with, and -- for reasons unclear to us -- the Liddell family's relationship with the newly famous author became more distant. So it came as a surprise to Dodgson when Mrs Liddell turned up with Alice and older sister Lorina for new portraits in June 1870, just as Alice was about to enter society. Can we read too much into the enigmatic gaze that the eighteen-year-old turns upon the camera lens? What do we make of Alice as Pomona, goddess of fruitfulness, as taken by Julia Margaret Cameron, where she deliberately mirrors the stance she took fifteen years before of beggar-maid Penelophon? And what do we think of the look given by the widowed eighty-year-old Alice Hargreaves when she visited America for the centenary celebrations of Dodgson's birth? Can posed photographs really tell us anything about the state of mind of the person portrayed, or do we expect to see their backstory echoed in their body language and in their eyes?

In a text of around a hundred pages (to which is added Acknowledgements, Further Reading and an index) Winchester covers a lot of ground, though I fear we are little wiser as to who the real Alice was. Apart from the beggar-maid portrait, reproduced on the dust jacket and as a frontispiece, no other images are forthcoming. Instead we do get a lot about early photography and a little about Dodgson's early nonsense writing and not very much about the Alice books. Odd facts stick in the mind, such as one uncle being a Commissioner in Lunacy and another being a Master of the Common Pleas; and I was struck by the curiosity that Winchester admires the conceit of Alice being like the Cheshire Cat's smile so much that he uses it

twice, at the end of the last chapter and immediately again at the end of the acknowledgements. Still, as a metaphor for the character of Alice it is probably most apt; and it certainly is no more than Dodgson's own letters tell us about this special child-friend of his.

Maya Panika says

A very slim volume – just 100 pages – detailing Charles Dodgson's fascination with the then, very new art/science of photography, and his subsequent relationship with Alice Liddell, who he was to immortalise as the central character in Alice in Wonderland.

The book is full of detail on Dodgson's love of taking pictures; it scrupulously avoids passing judgement on just why Dodgson's subject-of-choice was of very young girls, often in strangely provocative poses. The author prefers to dodge the usual suspicions and assumes an entirely innocent motive, that Dodgson simply and innocently loved little girls. Since this is a subject already covered in exhaustive detail in other books, the concentration on the known facts without the usual judgemental pondering is actually quite refreshing.

It's a charmingly written tale with a narrow remit and the only problem I had is with the complete lack of illustration. The photographs Dodgson took are described in detail in the text, making the reader almost desperate to see the picture in question. Considering that this is, ostensibly, a book entirely about a famous author's work as a photographer, it seems a very odd omission.

Cynda says

Winchester's writing, as usual, contains a cool historical, technical approach. I am glad I satisfied my curiosity about who Alice was. Perhaps she was not the creature of Dodgson/Carroll, but a creature of nature, a sensual creature of nature. To tell more would be giving the story away. Fewer than a 100 pages, so an easy read for the curious.

Greg says

There's some interesting information in this book including some fascinating background that quite probably combined a number of disparate factors to come together in Charles Dodgson's head to produce that magical book which Alberto Manguel called "a miracle of literature". Two factors of which were his interest in the new art of photography which he shared with his uncle Robert Skiffington, who was a Govt. appointed Commissioner in Lunacy.

The book also gives a clear look at the Victorian era educated middle class and the system at Oxford University that forbade teachers like in Dodgson's post from marrying unless he gave up his position. It looks to me that Charles Dodgson would have made a wonderful father if his options in those times had been different.

The book also explains how Charles Dodgson arrived at the name Lewis Carroll.

Julie says

British audiobook reader, Yes!
Many big and handsome words, Yes!

But that's all. This isn't about Alice. It's about photographs of Alice.

The book is good and interesting for about 100 pages. Which is fine, because that's how long the book is.

Jim Coughenour says

A pleasant harmless book that fails to live up to either its subject or its author's reputation. There's little here about the "the original Alice" and what there is fairly dismissive. Two pages from the end, Winchester writes that "Alice's later years were suffused with a terrible sadness" – which seems sweeping and idiotically glib when he continues "She missed something, and we all may like to imagine precisely what that something was: long-ago golden Oxford summer afternoons, that time of delicious foolishness, when Charles Dodgson would come a-calling..." Yes we all may; now let's have a toasted crumpet and weep.

There's even less about Lewis Carroll, the astonishing author of *Alice in Wonderland*. What there is instead is an extended footnote to Dodgson's fascination with photography (notoriously his photography of little girls; unsavory anachronistic associations of pedophilia are summarily swept aside, and rightly so). Yet, as other Goodreads reviewers have noted, Winchester's brisk history of the incipient enthusiasm for photography in 19th century England omits *any* illustrations, unless you count the photo on the dust jacket and I don't. This is inexcusable. No doubt we should blame the publisher. (Luckily, with a bit of Googling, the images can be discovered online.)

Still I have to wonder: if an entry on Dodgson were added to Ian Jeffrey's richly-illustrated *How to Read a Photograph*, would anyone miss this book?

John Keahey says

This is a nicely done book by a master storyteller. Simon Winchester looks into the photograph of the real Alice -- Alice Liddell, the young daughter of a dean at Oxford -- to whom he told the original story of a young girl "Underground" named Alice. (It didn't become "Wonderland" until the book was published.) Winchester writes about how Charles Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, learned the new art of photography and how, through his friendship with young children, turned into a master portrait photographer. Dodgson's storytelling seems to be secondary. Winchester realizes that he does not have to reinvent the wheel in telling the full biography of Dodgson; Morton Cohen (*Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, 1995) has already done that. Instead, our author focuses on Dodgson's relationship with the Liddell family and with their daughter, which seems to have been a proper one. Winchester's is a small book, 100 pages plus index. But well worth the read if you want to know the story behind one of the best-selling books in the history of publishing. "Alice in Wonderland" has never been out of print.

Ray Campbell says

I've looked at this small volume several times but have always set it aside for more substantive reads - my mistake. This short study encapsulates Victorian British society, the early development of the science, art and culture of photography and the delightful story of the writer we know as Lewis Carroll all in just a few pages. More than anything, it appears to be a short biography. In telling the story of Charles Dodgson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll), Winchester puts us on the ground in Oxford during the second half of the 19th century. This could be called a social history since it focuses on one a single person to show how photography became the hobby we virtually all enjoy today. That Dodgson would write down the stories he told a little girl he photographed named Alice as they enjoyed an afternoon rowing makes tale personal and connects the reader emotionally bringing the world Winchester describes into vivid focus.

After reading Winchester I always feel I've learned something, made a friend or two and visited a place I'll miss. It is a shame this is such a short book because I'd love to have spend a few more hours in this world. Other reviews have been critical of Winschester's analysis of the inner life of Dodgson's subjects as superficial and subjective. Winchester doesn't document every opinion as he writes, but it is clear he has read every diary and letter. He refers to his sources authoritatively though his tone, as always, is so casual, poetic and storytelling in style that it is easy to forget that this is clearly a study based on research. He has a gift for making his subjects animated and relatable in a way that few others can. 5 stars!

John says

I listened to the audio (read by the author), so didn't mind that there were no photos by Lewis Carroll provided. The story of Alice (Lidell) herself didn't interest me much, but I did appreciate the details of early photographic challenges.

Joanna says

More than the title suggests, this book is not only about the girl who inspired Alice in Wonderland, but also about the history of photography and the making of "Lewis Carroll." Charles Dodgson is an interesting character, whom Winchester takes some pains to explain through his relationship with the Liddell family, particularly its younger members. The story that he tells gives the reader the picture of a playful man with an imagination and charm that draw children towards him (and vice versa). The impact of the book described in the last chapters is also fascinating! I am definitely ready now to go back and read Alice Underground.

In addition, the history of photography is well laid out in and consumable to someone with only peripheral interest.
