

Enough About Lessons

AS LEWIS CARROLL, THE SCHOLAR CHARLES DODGSON COULD UNLEASH HIS PLAYFUL SIDE AND INDULGE HIS LOVE FOR THE GASLIGHTS AND GLITTER OF THE VICTORIAN THEATRE. BY CAITLYN LEHMANN

"That's enough about lessons," the Gryphon interrupted in a very decided tone. "Tell her something about the games now."

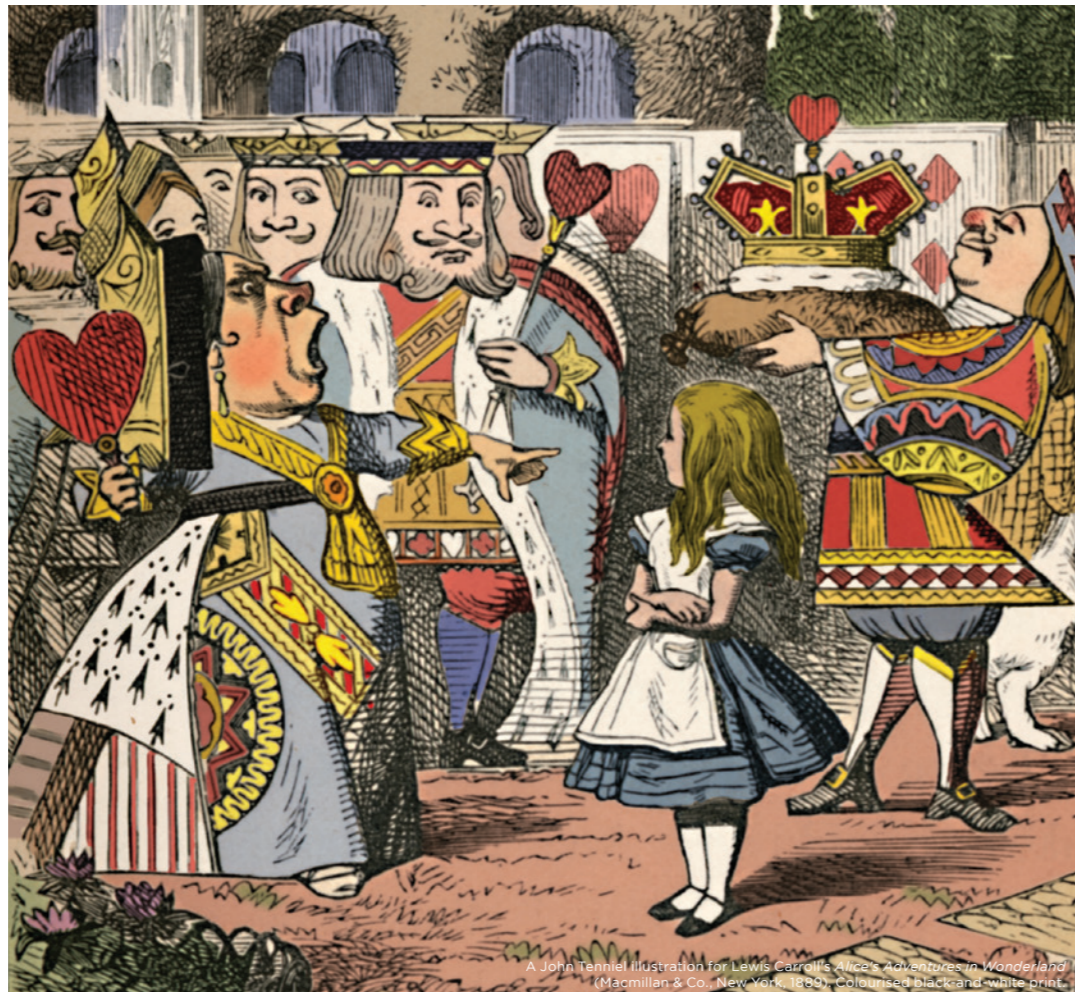
In the realm of children's literature, few authors are more fascinating or paradoxical than Charles Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll. A mathematics don by day, producing conservative essays on Euclidean geometry, he transformed by the starlight of a literary alter ego into a peddler of nonsense and a children's showman. He was laced with contradictions: fastidious yet regularly in debt, an outspoken moralist and a passionate theatre-goer.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (so the story goes) began life one golden afternoon, when Carroll took the Liddell sisters – Edith, Lorina and ten-year-old Alice – out rowing on the river near Oxford. As the party glided past green meadows and haycocks, drowsy under a sky of cloudless blue, Carroll kept pretty, bright-eyed Alice entertained with the tale of a girl who fell down a rabbit hole. Alice, at the day's end, begged Carroll to write it down. Nothing more was thought of the matter until Christmas 1864, when Carroll made her a gift of his handwritten, hand-illustrated manuscript, *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*.

The manuscript's successor, expanded and renamed *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, reached bookshops by the Christmas of 1865. Sales began slowly; critics were cautious. But for the Victorian child, buffeted by moral and religious instruction, Carroll's whirlpool of parody, verse and adult foibles quickly proved irresistible. Deliciously anti-authoritarian, Alice spurned the conventions of Victorian children's literature, casting its heroine, as essayist Richard Kelly writes, into "an amoral universe where right and wrong are ambiguous and where no god or religious precepts reign over her adventures."

Alice wasn't the only one adrift in a sea of moral uncertainty. So, too, was her creator, whose extraordinary talent for wordplay and theatrics rested uneasily with the prudent lifestyle expected of an Anglican deacon. Born in an era when clerical training was still obligatory for aspiring scholars, Carroll was a committed Christian caught in the fracas between traditional belief-based religion and the resounding arguments of science and reason. He faithfully attended chapel each morning, yet read Darwin's books on evolution. His spiritual anxieties festered; he was gravely troubled by his "undisciplined and worldly affections".

Whatever guilty interests Carroll harboured, certainly none was more indulged than his love of theatre, those palaces of gaslights, glitter, and sin from which Anglican clergy were barred. Carroll's father, the Reverend Charles Dodgson, was opposed to the public stage; Carroll's sisters never dared set foot there. Carroll, however, was a natural entertainer. As an eldest son with a string of restless younger siblings, he unleashed his creativity in the form of puppet plays and magic shows, play readings, droll family newsletters and games played in the family's huge garden. (Of course, private theatricals were acceptable.)



A John Tenniel illustration for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Macmillan & Co., New York, 1890). Colourised black and white print.

The ban on priests attending theatre did not encourage Carroll to be ordained as one. He remained a deacon.

Carroll had his own well-defined views on the propriety of the stage: he was wary of 'immoral' content, and steadfastly avoided London's music halls with their specular showpiece corps de ballets of scantily-clad women. He saw a great deal of Shakespeare, melodramas, farces and light operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan. Very rarely he saw ballet at the opera, and when he did, he did not disapprove. "We saw some beautiful dancing," he noted, after a performance of *Esmeralda* in 1857, "Mademoiselle Pocchini being the chief and best performer."

Between 1855 and 1897 Carroll attended more than 400 performances, mostly in London, where he often saw productions more than once. None were more significant than the annual children's pantomimes that opened at Christmas, which left their traces on the *Alice* books. Not strictly for children (and sometimes lasting up to five hours!), the pantomimes presented favourite fairytales told with knock-about comedy, all kinds of clever stage tricks, songs, witty puns, audience participation and enchanting scene changes. By the mid-Victorian era they were an institution, with a store

of characters that reemerged across popular culture – men dressed as pantomime dames, Harlequins and Columbines, actors in elaborate animal costumes, young women in the parts of boys – as well as hundreds of child dancers and actors.

Among the host of pantomimes Carroll recorded were *Whittington and his Cat*, *Children in the Wood*, *Cinderella*, *Little Goody Two Shoes*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Robin Hood and his Merry Little Men* (which he saw six times), *Aladdin*, and *Faw, Fee, Fo, Fum*, based on *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which boasted a "Grand Ballet by One Hundred Coryphées". Nor was Carroll's fondness for these theatrical fiestas unusual in the eyes of his contemporaries. Much like the popular fairytale ballets of today, pantomimes appealed, as historian Anne Varty notes, to children and "children of larger growth".

Less often appreciated, though, is the indelible mark of pantomime on Carroll's *Alice*, seen in the illustrations of John Tenniel, whose waspish drawings contributed enormously to the book's early success. Carroll and Tenniel, men of very different temperaments, were panto-wise kindred spirits. The outsize heads with which Tenniel depicts the Queen of Hearts, the Cook and

the Duchess evoke the hideously caricatured, big-headed masks that commonly featured in pantomime openings. Carroll's text channels pantomime through waddling playing cards and chatty critters (both familiar motifs in the theatre of his day), through characters that break suddenly into song and dance, and, most grotesquely, in the violence of the pot-slinging cook and baby-flinging Duchess, in scenes derivative of traditional Harlequinades.

It's hardly surprising that *Alice*, which is written as a series of episodic scenes, swiftly found its way to the stage. Carroll himself entertained ideas of *Alice* as a pantomime in 1867. He instructed his publishers to register the book's dialogues as dramatic speeches, and later approached the composer Arthur Sullivan, of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, about music. Several small-scale adaptations, most of them unauthorised, appeared in the meantime. In December 1886 the first official staging of *Alice in Wonderland* finally took place at Piccadilly's Prince of Wales Theatre. Carroll gave producer Henry Savile Clarke his blessing, provided the show contained nothing "suggestive of coarseness".

Although Carroll was far from being an aggressive self-promoter, his enthusiasm to see *Alice* faithfully reproduced as theatre contributed to a burgeoning literary phenomenon. Besides *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass*, the original manuscript gifted to Alice Liddell was published in facsimile form in 1886. A 'People's Edition' followed in 1887 and *The Nursery Alice* in 1890. By 1879 there were translations of *Alice's Adventures* in German, French, Russian and Italian.

When Carroll died in 1898 the avalanche of *Alice* merchandise was just beginning. However, he lived to see an *Alice* biscuit tin, card game and postage-stamp case issued, and he sanctioned the release of the children's birthday diary, *Alice's Wonderful Birthday Book*. Royalties provided him with a modest living. He kept up his theatre-going, penned essays on the stage and the indecency of costuming, and supported the theatrical ambitions of several young acquaintances. Anxiously conscientious and sensitive to suffering, he gave to the Society for the Protection of Women and Children, and to the Battersea Dogs' Home.

Christopher Wheeldon's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*® is now the latest in a long line of ballets inspired by Carroll's works. And, curious to say, while it lacks the Yuletide magic of swelling Christmas trees and dancing snowflakes, *Alice's* links with gift-giving and pantomime make this ballet a worthy festive rival to *The Nutcracker*. Wheeldon salutes tradition in a production brimming with stage magic and wonder, spiced with parodies for keen observers and merry hijinks for the littlies – and, of course, by adding his own endearing and formidable pantomime dame. This *Alice*, like the best Victorian pantomimes, has pleasures for everyone. Carroll would surely approve.

Dr Caitlyn Lehmann is a cultural historian specialising in dance history and 18th-century studies



Amber Scott. Photography Kate Longley