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Carroll and Cohen: On a First-Name Basis with Charles Lutwidge Dodgson

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Lewis Carroll: A Biography, by Morton Cohen. New York: Knopf, 1995.

In what undoubtedly will become the standard biography of Lewis Carroll, Morton Cohen has produced a thoughtful, fascinating, highly readable account of a man best known for writing the most popular children's books of the nineteenth century—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). The world's premier Carroll scholar, Cohen has over the past thirty years produced the standard two-volume collection of Carroll's letters (1978) as well as six other volumes on Carroll. As this massive biography suggests, to limit Carroll's role to that of children's author is vastly to underestimate and oversimplify his wide-ranging interests and accomplishments. Carroll's list of publications includes more than three hundred items. To this list one must add his nine-volume diary and voluminous correspondence. Carroll kept a letter register for the last thirty-five years of his life; the final tally was 98,721 letters sent and received. Cohen estimates that Carroll wrote at least 100,000 letters. What makes Cohen's biography superior to previous Carroll biographies—and there have been a number of excellent ones, including Derek Hudson's *Lewis Carroll* (1954) and Anne Clark's *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (1979)—is his immersion in every aspect of Carroll's life and work; having attempted to read everything of Carroll's now available to scholars, Cohen has this vast body of information at his fingertips. Ten years in the making, *Lewis Carroll* is the crowning scholarly achievement of Cohen's impressive academic career. Anyone who seriously wishes to understand Carroll's complex and contradictory life must read Cohen's *Lewis Carroll*.

This is not an insignificant assertion, given recent trends in critical approaches to Carroll. Although my students generally have a depressingly limited familiarity with Carroll's books, and that mostly based on a Disney film, they are familiar with two "facts" of Carroll's [End Page 221] life: that he took drugs and that he was too much interested in little girls.¹ I find a similar increase in scholarly speculation that focuses primarily on Carroll's life rather than on his literary texts. For instance, Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan, Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) off-handedly refers to *Wonderland* as the "author's fantasied seduction of a little girl" (3), and James Kincaid in *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992) frames Carroll as a pedophile. Now would certainly seem the time for a careful and detailed examination of the facts of Carroll's life. Since Carroll was an "indefatigable record keeper" (290), a systematic investigation of his records should reduce the need for such critical speculation.

As a biographer who has taken the time to sift through the copious primary material, Cohen takes a fairly dim view of the Carroll scholarship that seems so astonishingly, if not willfully, dismissive of it. Cohen rejects most Carroll criticism as "eccentric readings" that "may amuse" but "do not really bring us any closer to understanding Carroll or his work" (xxii). Indeed if there is a serious flaw in this biography, it is Cohen's refusal to engage in a discussion with scholars whom he views as misguided. But while Cohen chooses to dismiss, for the most part, those critical voices, he is carefully attuned to the multiple voices Carroll assumes in his children's texts, adult texts, diaries, and letters and to the voices of Victorians who knew Lewis Carroll, the writer of children's books, or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the more formal lecturer of mathematics at Christ Church, Oxford. Cohen's previous *Lewis Carroll: Interviews and Recollections* (1989), which gathered together all the existing memoirs of individuals who knew Carroll, functions as a companion volume to this biography and provides a useful source for its citations.

What Cohen attempts to create in this biography is an assembled portrait of the entire man, a portrait that makes "fresh connections" and reveals "the real man behind the mask" (198). Cohen presents Carroll as a "formidable figure, a prototype of his time and class, a sharp portrait of an age graven into a single human being" (198). It is astonishing, then, that Cohen chooses to address his subject in the first person—astonishing especially because, as Cohen acknowledges, Carroll was obsessed by rules, rituals, and social conventions; he himself never addressed an equal, a colleague, an associate, or even a friend by a given name. Only children and members of Carroll's immediate family were addressed less formally. Cohen's familiarity is astonishing too when

one realizes that even Alice Liddell, the [End Page 222] child who inspired Carroll to write *Wonderland*, refers to Carroll as Mr. Dodgson in her famous "Alice's Recollections of Carrollian Days." Cohen is the only person I can imagine who has earned the right to be on a first-name basis with Lewis Carroll. Without a doubt, Carroll would have been horrified by such an invasion of his privacy.

So what does Cohen's intimate portrait of Carroll reveal? It offers surprisingly little new material for those who have read Cohen's previous scholarship on Carroll. Much of the biography is a gathering together and recycling of Cohen's previous Carroll research, and this combination of new and old materials results in a curiously constructed biography, one that is organized thematically rather than chronologically.² Nevertheless, Cohen provides some surprises and perhaps one carefully coded bombshell. Although Cohen tends to resist critical analysis, he does present an original reading of *Wonderland*: he argues that Alice Liddell supplied the physical model for Alice wandering through Wonderland but that the spiritual and psychological Alice is Carroll himself. Although *Wonderland* represents the child's plight in Victorian upper-class society, and by extension the universal essence of childhood, the *Alice* books, Cohen suggests, should be read as a metaphor and a record of Carroll's own childhood. The chief taskmaster in Carroll's life, besides his own severe conscience, was his stern father. Carroll is the dutiful son who attempted to practice filial devotion and simultaneously filial rebellion, the latter with limited success, against his clergyman father. Cohen shows that the "grumbling-father theme" is a constant feature in Carroll's work; *Wonderland*'s many tyrants and menacing authority figures provide a revealing gloss on Carroll (334). Carroll's great guilt, which Cohen charts throughout the diary, is the result of not having lived the life that "Papa hoped he would" (341). This disappointing life included Carroll's rejection of Archdeacon Charles Dodgson's High Church belief for a more open Broad Church stance (which allowed Carroll to attend the theater), but more significantly it included Carroll's failure to marry and to follow his father into the church.

Carroll's failure to marry leads Cohen to Carroll's relationship with Alice Liddell and the much-discussed pages for 27, 28, and 29 June 1863, which are missing from Carroll's diary. Whereas many scholars have suggested that Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, Carroll's nephew and first biographer, destroyed these pages, Cohen asserts that it was Carroll's niece, Menella Dodgson, whose sensibilities were [End Page 223] so offended that she razored them out. (Despite the vast amount of material that Carroll left behind, scholars are fascinated by what is missing. Cohen prefers to base his judgments on facts, but in this situation he too is forced to speculate, using extant material to fill in the gaps.) Clearly, some sort of rupture between Carroll and the Liddell family occurred during the three-day period. Carroll was exiled from the children, and the Liddells are unmentioned in Carroll's diary for the next five months. Cohen argues that Carroll perhaps introduced the prospect of marriage between himself and his "ideal child friend" Alice to her parents (101). Carroll was then thirty-one years old and Alice only eleven. Cohen, noting that the twenty-year age difference between husband and wife was not uncommon in an era when men were expected to establish themselves financially and professionally prior to marriage,³ speculates that Carroll might have suggested an extended engagement. Cohen links Carroll's possible proposal to that of his brother, Wilfred, who at age twenty-seven fell in love with Alice Jane Donkin, aged fourteen, another episode that has been suppressed in Carroll's diary. The Liddells themselves offer an example of age discrepancy almost as extreme as that which Carroll may have proposed: at thirty-four, Dean Henry George Liddell had married the nineteen-year-old Lorina Reeve. Her concern for the social and financial advancement of her daughters has been firmly established, as has her dismissal of Carroll, to whom she seems to have attached little importance; when she commissioned H. L. Thompson to write a biography of her late husband, she stipulated that neither Carroll nor the *Alice* books be mentioned. Nor did Mrs. Liddell value the letters that Carroll must have written to Alice and her sisters, although she did cherish a short letter she received from William Thackeray that she mentions in her will.

Although Cohen presents Carroll's intense relationship with Alice Liddell within the context of a marriage proposal, he does not shy away from the troubling issue of Carroll's obsession with young girls, which Carroll preferred to consider as his overwhelming fascination with "child nature" (105). Cohen suggests that Carroll adapted William Blake's ideals of childhood innocence to Victorian sensibilities and argues that William Rossetti's description of Blake as "gentle and affectionate, loving to be with little children, and to talk about them" (107) can be applied to Carroll, but he does not leave it at that. In "The Fire Within," the central chapter of the biography, Cohen makes a somewhat guarded shift from his previous position, [End Page 224] articulated in "Lewis Carroll and Victorian Morality" (1984). Cohen still maintains that Carroll envisioned his life as essentially a battleground between good and evil but now acknowledges how perilously close to disaster this struggle brought Carroll, who "successfully transformed a life that might have easily teetered on the brink and fallen into the abyss" (533). Carefully correlating Carroll's "soul-searching, soul-searing" (205) diary entries, Cohen shows that these are directly linked to Carroll's intense emotional involvement with the Liddell children. Cohen argues that the coincidence of increasing self-recrimination and increasing intimacy with the Liddell children cannot be overlooked, nor can the guilt-ridden diary entries simply be attributed to Carroll's sense of his professional shortcomings or perceived indolence.

Whereas critics have long sought a clue in the missing pages of Carroll's diary, Cohen finds one in the adult poem "Stolen Waters." Composed and published in *College Rhymes* in 1862, when Carroll was most involved with the Liddell family, "Stolen

Waters" is a young knight's first-person account of having been seduced and deserted by a young maiden and of his regret for his lost virtue. In short, according to Cohen, Carroll's poem reveals that "the man is in trouble" (225). Cohen contrasts the overt references to sex, seduction, and guilty conscience in "Stolen Waters" with the "suppressed sexuality" of the imagery in *Wonderland* (225). Although Cohen resists the temptation to draw absolute parallels between "Stolen Waters" and Carroll's life, he concludes that the poem provides a glimpse into Carroll's "inner fears" and his romantic longing for Alice Liddell (223). This is a compelling reading, but Cohen seems to overlook the distinction between the erotic maiden, who like the knight is an adult, and the voice of the "angel-child," who summons the knight from his fallen state and directs him to a more spiritual, albeit asexual, one. Once rejected by the Liddells, Carroll seemingly reproduces this doomed relationship throughout the remainder of his life, turning to other girls for both aesthetic and emotional satisfaction. Cohen insists that Carroll never allowed himself to cross into the forbidden territory entered by his knight in "Stolen Waters." Thus Carroll's sexual desires and his guilt concerning them were a matter "not so much of deeds as thought" (221), supplying Cohen with his metaphor of "a fire raging beneath the surface" (221). Nevertheless, Cohen insists that it is "mean-spirited" to attribute the composition of the *Alice* books entirely to Carroll's suppression of his sexual desires, although he acknowledges [End Page 225] that it may have been one source of Carroll's creative accomplishments (280).

It is indeed unfortunate, if not disingenuous, that Cohen reverts to indirect language when dealing with such important issues as Carroll's attraction to children. The same sort of metaphorical language reappears when Cohen maintains that Carroll's "emotional targets clearly differed from most men's, [and that] the difference affected, even shaped his behavior" (190), and when he suggests that Carroll "recognized earlier than one might suppose that his inner springs differed from most men's, that his heart beat to a different drum, that in order to be true to himself he would be compelled to lead a life that was not only outside the norm but would come under particular scrutiny and raise questions" (190). At least when discussing Carroll's photographs of nude children, Cohen is willing to call naive at best Carroll's claim that his appreciation of nudes was entirely aesthetic. That Carroll felt the need to have another adult present when he photographed nude children points to his recognition, if only on an unconscious level, of that activity's erotic implications.

Cohen concludes his study by suggesting that Carroll's failure to correct his speech impediment was the "overarching symbol of his life" (533). According to Cohen, Carroll's stammer resulted in "a life hampered by inescapable limitations, blotted by imperfections and lacking emotional fulfillment" (533). But though Carroll stuttered, so did most of his brothers and sisters. Some critics have suggested that Carroll's self-portrait as the Dodo in *Wonderland* is the result of the difficulty he would sometimes experience in pronouncing his last name, so that "Dodgson" would come out "Dod-Dod-Dod-Dodgson." While undergoing therapy with James Hunt, the speech correctionist, Carroll first met George MacDonald, whose family's appreciative reading of *Alice's Adventures Underground* persuaded Carroll to revise and publish *Wonderland*. Even Cohen notes that Carroll, though always at ease with his child friends, did not, as some critics have suggested, invariably lose his stammer in their presence, for many children reported examples of his speech impediment as charming. Whereas Cohen attempts to see Carroll's stammer as a symbol of his failures, I see it differently. One could just as easily argue that Carroll's stammer brought him into contact with MacDonald, which eventually led to his greatest triumph, the publication of *Wonderland*. I have always appreciated the headmaster's perceptive report from [End Page 226] Richmond Grammar School informing Carroll's parents that their young son possessed "a very uncommon share of genius" (15).

Cohen's interpretation of Carroll's stammer, like his other attempts to render Carroll's life into metaphor, is one of the rare occasions when this biography falters. Moreover, there is no need for such a rendering, since Cohen's biography makes it clear that Carroll used the material of his own life to create *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*. Despite his occasional missteps in *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, Cohen has written an important critical text that, along with Roger Lancelyn Green's *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll* (1954) and Cohen's own *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, will become an indispensable volume in Carroll scholarship.

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Notes

1. Few scholars of children's literature would debate the importance of *Wonderland* or Lewis Carroll's place in the historical development of children's literature. Cohen maintains that, along with the Bible and Shakespeare's plays, the *Alice* books remain the most quoted in the Western world. I only wish it were so. Each semester I find fewer students who have read *Wonderland*, much less are able to quote from it. Many of the comic allusions that made it such a liberating text for Victorian child readers send contemporary college students to the glosses of Martin Gardner's *Annotated Alice* (1960) and *More Annotated Alice* (1990). Despite the gradual decrease in familiarity with Carroll's texts, there seems to have been an inverse growth in my students' and others' interest in Carroll's life.
2. I find Jean Gattégno's *Lewis Carroll: Fragments of a Looking-Glass* (1976)—which is not strictly speaking a biography of Carroll, in that it abandons any attempt to present its subject chronologically but rather discusses Carroll through a series of thirty-seven short but illuminating interlocking essays arranged alphabetically—one of the most informed sources of biographical Carroll criticism.

3. Consider, for example, the age disparity between Mr. Knightly and Emma in Jane Austen's *Emma*.

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