

# LEWIS CARROLL'S FRIENDSHIPS WITH ADULT WOMEN

by **Karoline Leach**

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Twelve photographs of Alice Liddell and her sisters, taken by Lewis Carroll and sold last year to an anonymous American buyer, are to remain in England – after government intervention, and at a cost of over £600,000 to a consortium led by the National Museum of Film, Photography and Television and the National Portrait Gallery. They were auctioned in June 2001 along with books, letters, manuscripts and personal effects that had belonged to Alice Pleasance Hargreaves, as Alice Liddell became, and some of this material has presumably already made its way to join existing Carroll collections in Texas and Princeton. Not so the photographs (including Alice as the "Beggar Maid"), which, so the arts minister, Tessa Blackstone, is reported as saying, "are a very important part of our cultural heritage, taken by a widely acknowledged pioneer of photography"

Our fascination with Lewis Carroll and his works remains undiminished, and at its epicentre lies a certain image, that of a Victorian clergyman, shy and prim, locked in perpetual childhood; a man who, said Virginia Woolf, "had no life", who sought comfort and companionship exclusively through friendships with "little girls", and who almost invariably lost interest in them when they reached puberty. In his biography (reviewed in the TLS, ----, 1995), Morton Cohen describes Carroll as a man with "differing sexual appetites", who "desired the companionship of female children". More crudely, but perhaps also more honestly, the popular press has labelled him a "paedophile". It is certainly true that, if Dodgson was alive to take the "Beggar Maid" and others of his photographs today, he would probably find himself the object of less flattering attention from the authorities.

A previously unknown letter by Carroll which touches on the whole question went on sale more recently at Sotheby's (December 13, 2001). The letter was written in 1893 to a woman friend, Ethel Moberly Bell, and concerned child nudity.

**"Were I really able to draw & had the offer of numerous child-friends as models, I think I would not dare to accept any over (say) 13. With the dawn of womanhood comes a new set of feelings, & new views of life, with which I should dread to interfere. But I hope Iris will be available for at least another year...."**

The catalogue entry comments that the letter:

**"clearly setting out the difficulties of an acquaintance with a child-friend once she had reached adolescence, would appear to be the most explicit expression of his sense of the loss of innocence entailed in what he called elsewhere 'the transition'. It clearly shows his sensitivity to the age of a child beyond which it was unsuitable for her to be drawn or photographed in the nude."**

This is certainly true. Though it is harder to see where the writer gets the idea that the "difficulties" lay in Carroll's *acquaintance* with "a child- friend once she has reached adolescence", rather than in portraying her artistically, which is evidently the difficulty Dodgson is expressing. Indeed, what tends to be overlooked by commentators on this aspect of Dodgson, is that when he claims a feeling of delicacy over using models above the age of thirteen, he is adopting the orthodoxy of his time, which dictated that the naked child was the embodiment of innocence, while post-pubescent bodies were to be avoided by the artist with truly decent motives. (By the end of the century, as the catalogue points out, this orthodoxy too was beginning to be questioned.) What also needs to be appreciated is the extent to which this stance was a piece of attitudinizing on his part, for, contrary to his own claim, Dodgson did frequently employ models well over the age of thirteen – indeed in another part of the Sotheby's letter he frankly admits to having made nude studies of "two professional" adult models. He also made unknown numbers of studies of 'semi- draped' post-pubescent girls and women. Writing to Alice Kitchin in the summer of 1880, Dodgson clearly states his appreciation of such models:

**"I have accepted...the fact that Xie [aged sixteen] won't be taken in one [an 'acrobatic dress'], but there ARE other damsels in the world, and it is quite possible that I might find one not averse to figure as an acrobat. I must however admit that it is less likely I shall find one as beautiful." ( Letter, May 31, 1880.)**

Two months later, he informs Mrs Kitchin that:

**"I used one of the 'swimming dresses' the other day for Gerida Drage [aged about sixteen], and got a very picturesque result...she is rather handsome." (Letter, July 25, 1880).**

The same Sotheby's catalogue entry quotes Cohen's biography in order to offer an apparently damning example of Carroll's peculiarities over children:

The month before this letter (September 1893) Carroll had answered an enquiry from his sister, Mary, in which she raised the issue of his "unusual friendships". He replied that "the only two tests I now apply... are, first my own conscience, to settle whether I feel it to be entirely innocent and right, in the sight of God; secondly, the parents of my friend, to settle whether I have their full approval for what I do." (Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, p.189)

At first glance, this letter would seem to bear out the story told by Cohen's biography: that Carroll's sister, shocked at his inappropriate friendships with little girls, wrote to him in order to try to persuade him to give up this odd compulsion. But in reality the "child"- friends referred to in the letter were Gertrude Chataway, aged twenty-seven, and Edith Miller, aged twenty-three. Gertrude was at the time staying with Dodgson, unchaperoned, in his seaside lodgings in

Eastbourne, and Edith was a local girl, a close friend of his and frequent visitor. Not for the first or last time, gossip about these highly unconventional relationships of his had become so virulent that it reached the ears of his sister Mary in Sunderland. Her letter and his reply deal, not with her disquiet over his associating with children (as indeed few Victorians would have had any disquiet about that), but his potentially scandalous relationships with wholly adult women. The interpretation placed on the letter by Cohen is in fact the entire opposite of the truth. Two years before, in September 1891, he had reported triumphantly to Ina Skene (nee Liddell):

**"Mr Toole's company was on tour at Eastbourne...and his 'leading lady' was staying with me! Please don't be more shocked than is absolutely necessary." (Irene Vanbrugh, the leading lady referred to, was nineteen at the time.)**

And a year later he took Beatrice Hatch, aged twenty-eight, to stay with him at Eastbourne, and wrote to Edith (September 1894):

**"Please remember that, so long as Beatrice is here, it will be strictly proper for either of you to call, even alone....And even after she has left, need you be supposed to know it, for a week or so? Your sexagenarian lover, C.L.D."**

On November 16, 1896, Dodgson wrote some potentially revealing words to Rachel Poole, one of his married women-friends:

**"Child-society is very delightful to me: but I confess that grown-up society is much more interesting!"**

He tended, it is true, to be a little inconsistent in his autobiography. "My views about children are changing: I now put the nicest age at about seventeen", he wrote to Alexander Macmillan in 1877, while in 1894 he wrote to Mrs Caroline Egerton, "Twenty or thirty years ago, 'ten' was about my ideal age for [girl- ]friends: now 'twenty' or 'twenty-five' is nearer the mark." But the consistent reality was that Lewis Carroll's 'child friends' were never the uniform collection of 'little girls' we now assume them to have been. For the past century, his biographers have largely ignored these declarations, in favour of a preoccupation with Carroll and little girls; and the popular view has followed theirs. Yet this familiar, disturbing picture of Carroll's exclusive attachment to pre-pubescent females is flatly contradicted by the evidence of his letters and the nine volumes of his private diaries. It is simply that these facts have been difficult to find or have been somehow ignored until quite recently with the publication of studies by Hugues Lebailly, a Professor of English Cultural Studies at the Sorbonne.

As Lebailly has shown in papers such as "Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, Eminent Ruskinian" (1996) and "C.L.D. and females" (2001), Dodgson's MS diaries contain several entries that express his admiration for the adult female form in works of art, and his enthusiasm for the "pretty" actresses, such as Gwynne Herbert and Milly Palmer, he saw at the theatre. "[Rossetti] showed us many beautiful pictures," reads one such entry (April 18, 1865), "two quite new: the bride going to meet the bridegroom (from Solomon's Song) and Venus with a background of roses." The latter picture is the notorious "Venus Verticordia", which shocked and disgusted

much of the art establishment when it was publicly displayed. "[Lord Leighton showed me] some lovely pictures", runs the entry for July 4, 1879; "including...a sort of 'Hero' on the shore (nude figure, seated, back view)." The painting in question is the massively feminine "Psamathe"; Dodgson also expressed admiration of Leighton's "Idyll", featuring two diaphanously clad female figures, one with one breast exposed. "[Went to see] Miss Louey Webb's aquatic entertainment", the diary announces in July 1887; "...Miss Webb is 18, and as she is beautifully formed, the exhibition is worth seeing, if only as a picture." Almost all such references were omitted from the 1953 published diaries.

Lebailly's work on the lost realities of Victorian "child-worship" (in ["C.L. Dodgson and the Victorian Cult of the Child"](#), 1998) makes clear the extent to which Carroll's artistic and emotional "obsession" with little girls was and remains a misunderstood expression of this strange phenomenon. In parallel research of my own, I discovered that the man revealed in the MS diaries manifestly was not "exclusively focused on children". On the contrary, he recorded numerous relationships with grown women. And analysis of his published correspondence (*The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, edited by Morton Cohen, 1979) showed that out of nearly 500 letters to so-called "child-friends", only 117 were actually to pre-teen children, while 152 were to teenage girls aged between fourteen and seventeen, and 225 were to women aged over eighteen (the oldest being forty-two).

What all of this unambiguously makes clear is that he did not, as the biographies maintain, lose interest in his "child-friends" once they reached the age of puberty; in fact large numbers of his "child-friends" were already teenagers or grown women when his friendships with them began. For reasons which will become clear, Dodgson preferred to refer to them as "children", but manifestly they were not. Similarly, there is no sign that his contemporaries considered him to be sexually "strange" about small girls. In fact, it was not his supposed predilection for little girls that raised eyebrows, but his numerous "unconventional" relationships with women, both married and single. The modern misapprehension is a bizarre construct, a mixture of deliberate deception on the part of Dodgson and his family, purely accidental muddle, and misunderstanding.

A powerful mythology already surrounded the name "Lewis Carroll" before he died. It was saturated in the mores and symbols of the Victorian cult that equated a love of children with moral perfection and innocence. Carroll quickly grew to embody this cult of child-worship, and by the early 1890s he was being presented in the press as a latter-day saint, a "genuine lover of children" (*Harper's Monthly Magazine*, July 1890), living in "an El Dorado of innocent delights" (*Illustrated London News*, April 1891). Even people who knew him well, such as Gertrude Thomson, writing in the *Gentlewoman* of January 1898 (the year of his death), could create impossibly idealized images of Carroll as "some delicate ethereal spirit enveloped for the moment in a semblance of common humanity".

This was an image that Dodgson was happy to foster from time to time for his own reasons – but it was never in any sense a reality. As his diaries and letters make plain, he liked to take women friends such as Constance Burch, Beatrice Hatch, Gertrude Chataway and Winifred Stevens (to mention just four) on holiday with him. At Oxford, he enjoyed tête-à-tête dinners with them that might last well into the night, and he was known to escort married women up to London for the

weekend; they occasionally stayed overnight with him in his sisters' Guildford home. Not surprisingly, this generated gossip, which sometimes amused but often enraged him. He joked frequently about "Mrs Grundy", the fictional guardian of middle-class morality, claiming she dogged his footsteps incessantly. "Just now she – Mrs G. – is no doubt busy talking about me and another young friend of mine – a mere child only four or five and twenty – whom I have brought down from town to visit my sisters", he wrote to Maud Standen on April 14, 1884. (The "young friend" on that occasion was the artist Theodosia Heaphy.)

It was in order to evade some of this disapproval that he began to manipulate the developing Carroll myth by occasionally implying, or at least allowing others to assume, that his many girlfriends were somewhat younger than they really were. For, according to Victorian mores, a girl under the age of fourteen was a "safe" companion for a bachelor, since she was assumed to be below the age of sexual availability. There was nothing wrong in a man taking a child for a holiday by the sea. When writing to his more straitlaced friends, therefore, Dodgson used language cleverly to infantilize his female companions, describing them as "children" even when they were twenty-five years old. This pretence met with ready acceptance from his many admirers and from the Victorian public.

After his death, the process of reinvention was continued in the biography written by Dodgson's nephew, Stuart Collingwood: *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (1898). Dodgson's family were intensely religious, and had been shamed and distressed by his flouting of convention. After his death, they were intent on one thing – to maintain the sanctity of Carroll, "the patron saint of children", and to ensure that certain facts about Dodgson's life were never made public. In order to achieve this, Collingwood took Dodgson's own distortions of the ages of his "child-friends" and refined the deception by implying (while not openly stating) that all his uncle's female friends had been "little girls". In fact, of the letters quoted by Collingwood in support of his thesis, almost half (nineteen out of forty-three examples) were to "child-friends" over the age of fourteen at the time of writing, and more than a quarter to young women aged over eighteen. None the less, the sleight of hand proved successful, and Collingwood's portrait of an unworldly dreamer surrounded by small female children became the standard image that is still central to modern biography.

The Dodgson family then took steps to ensure that this "official" version would never be challenged by destroying large amounts of documentation, including whole sections of Carroll's private diary, and by locking the remainder of the evidence away from public scrutiny. For the fifty or sixty years after Collingwood's biography was published there was, due to the obsessive secrecy of the Dodgson family, an almost total lack of prima facie documentation available for biographers. By the time more evidence began to be available – for example with the sale of Dodgson's MS diaries to the British Library in 1969 – the legend had become so deeply ingrained in the popular and scholarly mind that no one thought to question it. Endeavouring to save Lewis Carroll's reputation by expunging the evidence for his relationships with adult women, his family instead created the basis for the modern belief that Carroll was a sexual deviant. It is an added irony that the small deceits Dodgson practised to make himself seem more respectable are now being perpetuated to make him seem the thing he would most have dreaded – a potential destroyer of innocence.

And what of Alice Liddell herself, the most famous "child-friend" of all? Alexander Taylor's *The White Knight* (1952), with its story of a man who fell in love with a little girl and renounced "all intention of marrying because of a child not yet out of the nursery", Dennis Potter's television play *Alice* (1965), with its portrayal of the lonely, helplessly stammering Dodgson, gripped by repressed passion for his "real Alice", and its repetition twenty years later in the film *Dreamchild* (with added soft-focus suggestiveness), all freely mixed biography and fiction. Morton Cohen and others present this story – elaborated to include Dodgson's proposal of marriage to the eleven-year-old child, which is said to have precipitated a crisis in his relations with her family, dated firmly in the summer of 1863, and his being forbidden to see her – as biographical fact. Yet evidence to support it is extremely slender. Neither Dodgson's extant diaries nor his surviving letters give any indication that he had any special attachment to Alice, over and above his affection for the entire family. There are only four remotely significant individual references to Alice, two of them grossly unflattering, and none of them particularly revealing of special feelings in any way, unless we count one brief statement of his intention to write a poem about her.

To bulk out this evident lack, Cohen adduces two pieces of documentation to corroborate the Dodgson-Alice "crisis". One records a rumour, repeated by Lord Salisbury in a one-sentence aside in a private letter from the late 1870s (when Alice was twenty-six), to the effect that Dodgson had recently asked for "the real Alice's" hand, had been refused, and had "gone out of his mind". Even if we do not balk at Cohen's use of a rumour from 1878 to support speculation concerning events in 1863, this seems fragile. Similar rumours circulated at different times about Alice's mother, her governess, and her older and younger sisters. (Such rumours, as I argued in the TLS, May 3, 1996, may have been responsible for the subsequent cooling of relations with the Liddells.) Do we conclude that Dodgson enjoyed at least four separate liaisons with all of them?

Secondly, Cohen makes much of a single cryptic diary entry, for October 17, 1866:

**"On Saturday Uncle S. dined with me, & on Sunday I dined with him at the Randolph, & on each occasion we had a good deal of conversation about Wilfred, & about A.L. – it is a very anxious subject."**

Wilfred was Dodgson's younger brother, who was causing his family some embarrassment at the time, not least over his courting of a girl called Alice Donkin. She was young (fifteen), Wilfred had no job and no money, and was therefore in no position to offer a formal proposal; his family were worried about potential indiscretions. It seems most likely that the "anxious subject" was their love affair; but who was A.L.? Cohen presents it as a given that the initials "A.L." stand for Alice Liddell, and writes "the two brothers, both in their prime, were attached to two teenage youngsters named Alice". This is to say the least, arguing somewhat ahead of the data. There is nothing in the entry to even suggest the sex of the unknown A.L., nor any hint that he or she is any kind of love object for Dodgson, or any connection of his at all. Not only is there absolutely no record of Dodgson having even seen Alice Liddell for 17 months prior to this account, he never refers to her as "A.L." anywhere else in the nine volumes of his diary, or in any extant letters. In fact it seems clear that "A.L." was connected with Wilfred in a single "anxious subject", and, given that, is far more likely to have been the brothers' Aunt Lucy (who is at least referred to elsewhere in Dodgson's diary as "Aunt L"), or some man now lost to history, to whom

Wilfred owed money, than Alice Liddell. As a piece of evidence for a supposed love affair with 'the real Alice', this is a non-starter.

There is, however, one remaining document that might be thought to offer some support for the Dodgson-Alice "love story": a strange, self-serving letter written by Collingwood to his cousin Menella Dodgson, in February 1932, when celebrations of the centenary of Carroll's birth were getting under way, and Dodgson's surviving family were being solicited for information. Menella, who had inherited from him the mantle of keeper of the family papers, was the recipient of some of this unwelcome attention, wrote to Collingwood for clarification on a few biographical points. It is possible to reconstruct her questions from the answers. What, she wanted to know, had happened to the four missing volumes of Carroll's diary? Was there any truth in the current newspaper stories connecting Dodgson romantically with a) the actress Ellen Terry, and b) various members of the Liddell family? And what had Collingwood meant by his reference to the "shadow of disappointment" that lay over his uncle's love poetry?

To the first question Collingwood replied that he had "not the least idea" where the missing volumes might be, and assured his cousin that he had never had the "complete diary". "But", he added, "possibly Uncle Wilfred had it." In fact Collingwood was being much less than honest. He had indeed owned the complete diary and had quoted from every one of the now missing volumes in his biography. His response to the other enquiries was even more circumspect and strange.

**Nothing I have read in L.C.'s diaries or letters suggested – to the best of my memory – that he had ever had any *affaires de coeur*....I think that Aunt Fanny once told me that it was the family's opinion that Uncle Charles had had a disappointment in love, & that they also thought (or she also thought) that the lady in question was Ellen Terry....The "shadow" I hinted at had no other basis than what I had heard from Aunt Fanny.... When Ellen Terry was growing up – about 17 – she was lovely beyond description (I have seen a photo of her, which belonged to L.C., at about that age), and it is highly probable that he fell in love with her; he may even have proposed to her.**

Then Collingwood abruptly changed tack. Come to think of it – he *did* know about Lewis Carroll's love life, after all, and Terry wasn't his only passion; Collingwood had suddenly remembered another.

**Whereas, in regard to the Liddells, it was Alice who was undoubtedly his pet, and it was his intense love for her (though she was only a child) which pulled the trigger and released his genius. Indeed it is quite likely that Alice's marriage to Hargreaves may have seemed to him the greatest tragedy of his life.**

Biographers wisely tend to dismiss most of this exercise. As Morton Cohen points out, Ellen Terry was married before Dodgson even met her, and was thus highly unlikely to have ever been the recipient of a marriage-proposal from him. But some writers have made an exception for the second part, suggesting that Collingwood's speculation about Alice is "more to the point". But why is it? It is supported by almost no independent evidence, any more than are Dodgson's

proposal of marriage to the eleven-year-old Alice, her family's anxieties, or his banishment from the Deanery. Unquestionably, Collingwood, for a while the keeper and perhaps the mutilator of Dodgson's diaries, knew more about his "affaires de coeur" than anyone else still alive at the time. Equally unquestionably, he had long ago decided to say nothing about what he knew. In his biography, he had stated that there was nothing to be gained by "lifting the veil" on Dodgson's private pain; now it seems most likely that he was using the Terry and Liddell stories - which were already becoming legends in the popular press - as a blind, to conceal what he knew even from the rest of his own family.

Alice Liddell at seven *may* have been, as Dodgson claimed in a much-quoted and over-dramatized letter of 1885, his "ideal child-friend", though there is no contemporary evidence for this and it is possible that he was merely flattering her (he was, after all, asking to borrow back his original Alice manuscript at the time.) Even her role in the genesis and content of his most famous work has been both simplified and exaggerated, into a tale of inspiration. He is supposed always to have told the story "for" her, as if her two sisters who were also present in the boat on the way to Godstow that famous July 4 had been mere incidentals. It is true that Alice did ask him to write down the story, and that he promised to do so. But, contrary to the legend that has him rushing home and writing all night, apart from writing out 'the headings' next day while travelling to London with the Liddells, he seems to have done nothing about it at the time or for some time afterwards. It was only a chance meeting with the three Liddell girls four months later, on November 13, that rescued his promise from oblivion. He started work on the Alice story that evening; but it took two years of very intermittent labour to finish it, and in the interim his promise to Alice Liddell had begun to take second place to finding a publisher for what, he now realized, was a potentially commercial story. By the time she received her story-book, "Alice's Adventures Underground", in late 1864, the longer Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was nearing publication.

Perhaps it was guilt about how long it had taken him to fulfil his promise that caused him to post the book to her, rather than give it to her in person – even though she lived just across the quad. Perhaps, as well, he might have felt some slight discomfort about the way in which his "gift" to the "dear child" had been transformed into a personal triumph for him. It seems likely that he remained both grateful and guilty towards Alice Liddell for the rest of his life. He didn't forget to commemorate her in the four Alice volumes; he paid her the charming compliment of using her birthday as a leitmotif, and he wrote a lovely verse for her at the end of *Through the Looking-Glass*. But there are few references to Alice Liddell in Dodgson's journal for the last thirty years of his life, and what little correspondence he had with her is characterized by politeness, banality and distance. He did not, according to all the evidence, "desire a holy union with her", as Cohen suggests, or consider her the love of his life – or find her irreplaceable. In truth he enjoyed many other relationships with girls and women that seem to have been far closer, more romantic, more mysterious and more important to him than his friendship with the dean's middle daughter.

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