

LEWIS CARROLL AS ROMANTIC HERO:

Anne Thackeray's *FROM AN ISLAND* by Karoline Leach

(this article first appeared in *The Carrollian*, 2004)

The novella *From an Island* was published in 1877. Its author, Anne Thackeray, was the daughter of the famous novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. The little book is a roman-à-clef, a story based on real people, and almost all the characters and possibly also some of the events are drawn faithfully from Anne Thackeray's personal experience.

These identities are not simply arbitrary. They are intended, according to Thackeray's daughter and granddaughter, as a celebration of a place and people who were particularly meaningful to Thackeray at a certain time of her life. The place is the Isle of Wight, and the people are those that she loved deeply, and who, in most cases, she associated with the island. Most of them belonged to what was called the 'Freshwater Circle', a group of people, many of them artists, centred around the Poet Laureate, Alfred Tennyson, and the photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron.

Thackeray spent a great deal of time on the island in the years immediately after her father's traumatic death in 1863, which left her and her sister bereft and alone in the world. In Tennyson and Cameron she seems to have found substitute parents, and in their homes on the island she found sanctuary, love and protection, and the respite she needed to begin to put together a new life. *From an Island* was in part at least her way of giving thanks; of celebrating the place and the people who had been so dear to her.

Her daughter's copy of the published book was annotated with the true identities of most of the major characters, and these annotations still survive. Apparently, 'Lord Ulleskelf' of the novel is Tennyson; 'Mrs St Julian' is Julia Margaret Cameron; 'Missie' is Margy Ritchie, Anne's adopted daughter; 'Mr St Julian' is the artist G. F. Watts, another intimate member of the 'Freshwater Circle'.

But most curiously, the novel's hero and romantic love interest, George Hexham, is – Lewis Carroll.

He is the young photographer from "Christ's College Cambridge", who arrives on the island to photograph the landscape as well as the illustrious people assembled there. This young man falls in love with the heroine Hester, but then nearly breaks her heart by flirting heavily with another woman and offending her father by sneering at his favourite poet, Wordsworth. He and his beloved seem on the verge of leaving each other forever unhappy and unfulfilled when an eleventh hour passionate declaration of love from Hexham sets everything to rights and heralds a happy ending. For anyone reading this novel, this naturally raises two major questions: 1) How lifelike is this fictional portrait? and 2) What is it doing there? The second question is particularly relevant because all the other real people in Thackeray's novel are there because she loved them, was grateful to them, wanted to celebrate them. In the words of her granddaughter, she was "expressing her devotion" to these beloved people. So to understand why she chose to include Lewis Carroll in this select and intimate assembly becomes potentially very meaningful to a wider understanding of his biography. Does a deeper examination of her MS in comparison with the record of their real-life association give any clues?

WHY IS CARROLL THERE?

Anne Isabella Thackeray was born in 1837, the eldest daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray and his unstable wife Isabella, who was eventually committed to an asylum

when Anne was still a child. The death of her famous father in 1863 plunged Anne and her sister Minny into a period of financial and psychological upheaval during which they found refuge in the home of the Tennysons on the Isle of Wight. In 1877, at the comparatively advanced age of 40, and after a lifetime spent intermittently bemoaning her spinster-state, she married her much younger cousin Richmond Ritchie. It was apparently a love match and Anne eventually gave birth to two children, Hester and William. She died in 1919. Already a published writer, Anne began writing *From an Island* in 1868, nine years before her marriage and during a period of some seeming depression in her life. Her sister, Minny, was newly married and away in America. In writing her MS, Anne was, according to her granddaughter, "pouring out and possibly exorcising all her frustrations", at her own romantic failure. The evidence from her side, then, indicates that by this time, 1868, Thackeray had already met Dodgson. How does this compare with what can be deduced from the evidence on Dodgson's side? His diaries and letters confirm that he knew Anne Thackeray, and indeed he expressed quite unusually passionate admiration of her writing. In his diaries he describes it as "lovely writing" and he confided to her in person that:

I had with me a copy of *Five Old Friends*, etc. ...in order to read a bit now and then before beginning to write, and so get my ear into tune. Not that I want to imitate your style ... however much I admire it, but to read such English sets my fancy going, so to speak: till sometimes the sentences come almost too quick for me to write them down... (Cohen, 1979, II, pp. 686-7)

That this was something more sincere than flattery is indicated by the fact that he wrote almost identical words in a private letter to his sister Mary nearly five years later:

We have one living novelist whose English is lovely – Miss Thackeray. I have brought a volume of hers with me, to read a bit, now and then, and get my ear into tune, before going on with *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (Cohen, 1979, II, p. 916)

This indicates a rare degree of admiration. Of all other contemporary woman writers possibly only Christina Rossetti was ever awarded a similar degree of tribute. Interestingly, there was a copy of *From an Island* on Charles Dodgson's bookshelf, along with numerous other of Anne Thackeray's novels.

Yet despite the warmth of his admiration for her, and despite the obvious indicators in her text that he impacted on her quite forcefully, Thackeray hardly features at all in his surviving diaries; he records only a handful of meetings between them and there is little that leads one to suppose a very deep or meaningful relationship or to understand why she chose to celebrate him as she did. But admittedly what fragments of information we have seem to be contradictory. The story is far from complete or clear.

In seeming contradiction to Thackeray's MS, which implies a meeting between them some time prior to 1868, Dodgson's earliest extant record of meeting Anne Thackeray is at a dinner party in 1869:

Oct 5 1869: Last night I dined at the Synges, and met Dr and Mrs Merriman, Dr and Mrs Hume, Miss Thackeray (who is staying in the house), and Mr G. Taylor. (Wakeling, VI)

It has generally been assumed that this was their first meeting, and the anomaly of Thackeray's MS has tended to be ignored – indeed most of Carroll's biographers seem to be unaware it even exists. But on closer analysis Dodgson's diary entry is actually rather ambiguous. His use of the word 'met' – "I dined at the Synges, and met Dr and Mrs Merriman, Dr and Mrs Hume, Miss Thackeray..." gives the impression that he is meeting all of these people for the first time, and this is indeed how most commentators have chosen to read it, yet, as Jenny Woolf has unearthed, his diary shows he had already encountered the Merrimans and 'Mr G. Taylor' a few months before. He is evidently using the word to mean a meeting, but not necessarily a first meeting. It is therefore quite possible he is not meeting 'Miss Thackeray' for the first time in 1869. Indeed it might be safe to guess that he probably isn't. It might be safe to guess that they probably had

already met at some earlier period, prior to 1868, for which no record seems to exist, as the dating of the composition of Thackeray's MS would appear to indicate.

The most probable period for such an unrecorded earlier meeting must be the four years 1858-62, for which Dodgson's diaries have vanished. And since the novel is intended as a "literary sketch ... of a few days of life at Dimbola in the Isle of Wight", and since most of the other characters she celebrates were people she knew and loved from that place, the implication is that her association with Charles Dodgson also originated there. Theoretically this is quite possible, for Dodgson did visit the Isle of Wight on several occasions, two of them during the period covered by his missing diaries. He made a pilgrimage there to visit his hero Tennyson in 1859, and was there again on vacation in the spring of 1862, when he also met Julia Margaret Cameron. He and Anne Thackeray were therefore mixing in the same circles during the time and in the place that this novel is set. It seems not improbable that they encountered each other at this time.

If we know next to nothing about when the two may have met, we know little more about the nature of their subsequent relationship. The reference to seeing her at dinner at the 'Synges' in 1869, and a few later entries about calling on her in London, all written in his usual laconic style, tell us nothing about the manner or depth of friendship they enjoyed. At the moment it seems all we can say is that, however it was constituted, it appears to have persisted, at least intermittently, until his death. Subsequently she apparently remembered him with affection, and wrote imploring people not to forget, in the midst of the growing legend of his "child-friends" that he had also been good to "old children", presumably a curious euphemism for adults (those creatures that Carroll was, of course, not supposed to have favoured at all).

None of this seems, on the face of it at least, to give any clue about why Dodgson is featured in her novel in the way that he is. Does the novel itself or the history of its composition provide any further insights?

"EXPRESSING HER DEVOTION..."

We know that, having unleashed all this feeling and memory onto paper in 1868, Thackeray then put the MS aside for several years, until Tauchnitz, the publisher, asked her for material. She then picked up the text again and contrived to add what her granddaughter described as "a rather absurd plot" involving missing brothers, and a gothic figure called 'Captain Sigourney'. In this curiously schizoid guise it was duly published.

But even after this gesture towards commercialism *From an Island* remained overwhelmingly an exploration of two dominant themes – the celebration of real and beloved people and real experience, and the story of Hester St Julian's discovery of love and torment through the agency of one of those people – George Hexham/Charles Dodgson. Indeed although she is not traditionally regarded as one of the 'real' people, Thackeray seems to use Hester as the vehicle to explore the deepest and most personal emotional journey in the narrative. That she somehow identified with Hester or found her talismanic in some way is further implied by the fact that she named her daughter (born some years after the novel was finished) 'Hester' after this fictional character. Physically, Hester bears some resemblance to Anne herself or her younger sister Minny. The description – "Hester is tall, as are all her sisters" (Thackeray, 1996, p. 22) – not conventionally pretty but sweet-faced, could be applied to either of the girls, and the poignantly evoked closeness Hester enjoys with her father irresistibly calls to mind Anne's recent loss of her own father. Although the novel is notionally written from the point of view of the narrator 'Mrs Queenie Campbell', it is Hester's inner life and intense emotional experience of falling in love, being betrayed but then finding happiness, which is most vividly explored while Campbell, the nominal narrator, is left as little more than an outline. It seems to be Hester's function to carry the author's most personal observations and deepest sense of pain, and to somehow absolve it.

It also seems to remain true throughout this novel that the most searing and the most convincingly real portrayal is Hester's experience of devastation and perceived 'betrayal' at the hands of a man who has charmed her but then almost carelessly turned his attention to another woman, while the subsequent happy reunion is more sketchily and far less convincingly portrayed. The character of Hexham, although claimed repeatedly by the author to be a man in love, is at the same time portrayed in almost the opposite guise, as if there is a conflict between Thackeray's desire to be honest in this most autobiographical novel, and her need to impose a happy ending and some sort of salvation on her protagonists.

If we look beyond the novelist's reassurances to what she is actually describing, then Hexham as portrayed seems to be not a man in love, but a man who is having far more impact on the lady in question than he realises – or even cares. He is flirtatious, trying to persuade Hester to sit for a photograph, and insinuating, like a man who might be used to getting ladies to do as he wants by being a little charming. When it doesn't work, and she refuses, he walks off huffily, and begins to pay attentions to another woman, the sophisticated, glamorous, red-haired Lady Jane, flirting and charming her while Hester seems to be forgotten. To be sure, Thackeray tells us this is just a scheme to "punish" Hester for ignoring him, but like so much of Thackeray's rationalised explanations of his conduct, it seems not to ring true.

Hester in fact is devastated by what she feels to be his 'betrayal', and she responds to his renewed but quite casual attempts at friendliness by being icy and nervous. Yet, again, though he is supposed to be in love with her, Hexham hardly seems to notice or even care. Indeed he sits in the drawing room being deliberately offensive to her father in a way that no would-be suitor would surely contemplate. (Thackeray, 1996, p. 62) Despite his almost stunning rudeness, Hexham doesn't even seem to notice when Hester leaves the room in an agony of distress, but bounces up to her a few hours later, full of oblivious pep and without a word of apology, teasing her, and archly telling her he will be ready to try another photograph the next morning:

Hester drew herself up and said a haughty goodnight to Hexham as she passed him... Hexham seemed unconscious enough. "I shall be quite ready for sitters to-morrow morning Miss Hester", said the provoking young man cheerfully. "You won't disappoint me again". Hester did not answer and walked out of the room. (Thackeray, 1996, p. 65)

Hester is left in agony, trying to understand him; her father is presumably left fuming. But one receives the impression that Hexham will just roll off to bed, cheerfully unaware of the ferment he is leaving behind. Indeed poor Hester seems to spend most of the novel walking out of rooms or blushing madly or feeling hurt and bewildered, while her beau plays with the children or flirts with another lady, or gets excited about taking photographs, and generally gets on with his life. In the final denouement she maintains the mutual misunderstanding, the fear in Hester's heart that she is being played with, right up to the final paragraph that sees a hasty and rather unsatisfactory coming together. The strange and embarrassing confrontation lasts for more than two pages, yet the resolution is expressed in one perfunctory sentence:

No other word was spoken, but from that moment they felt they belonged to each other. (Thackeray, 1996, p. 70)

Given the intensity of Hester's pain and Hexham's oblivious invocation of it, this is, to say the least, a rather sudden change of pace. But it is as though even Thackeray isn't interested in or doesn't believe in this aspect of her characters' relationship. Contrast the brief, rather wooden and cliché-ridden moments of 'love' with the long detailed expositions of confusion and pain:

Hester was indignant to think of the possibility of having been laughed at and made a play of when she herself had come with a heart trusting and true and tender. He could not care for Lady Jane, but he had ventured to say more than he really felt to Hester herself. Now it seemed to her the whole aim and object of her behaviour should be to prevent Hexham from

guessing what she had foolishly fancied – Hexham, who had come back, and who was standing looking with keen doubtful glances into her face. ... “Hester”, he said once again, and stopped short, hearing a step at the door. Poor Hester blushed up crimson, with blushes that she blushed for again. Had she betrayed herself? Ah, no no! She started up. “I must go!”, she said. Ah, she would go to her father. There was love, tender, and generous love, to shield and protect, to help her: not love like this, that was but play, false, cruel, ready to wound. (Thackeray, 1996, p. 68)

She shows us how potentially justifiable the words “false, cruel, ready to wound” are by showing us Hexham as seemingly unrepentant for his selfish behaviour. He has encouraged Hester to think he might like her, then left her alone while he flirts with Lady Jane. She is confused, hurt and upset, but Hexham seems to have little time for that. His own feeling of outrage that she is not warm to him are all he seems to be aware of:

“Why are you so hard on me?” he burst out at last, a little indignantly and thoroughly in earnest. “How can you suppose I have ever fancied that odious woman?” (Thackeray, 1996, p. 69)

The mere fact that Thackeray feels the need to affirm his ‘earnestness’ is enough to make us doubt it and indeed Hexham in the story is being far from earnest, or at least far from honest. He is in fact actually blaming Hester for thinking he could fancy the woman he had been outrageously flirting with right before her eyes! He even repeats the same deliberate falsehood in a letter he writes to a friend, claiming that he has been doing his best to avoid the “overpowering” Lady Jane (Thackeray, 1996, p. 58).

This man, as Thackeray paints him, is not entirely nice or very much to be trusted, so that her efforts to squeeze him into the role of devoted suitor a page or two further on, have been fatally undermined before they even start. She attempts to redeem his behaviour by telling us he is in love, that in Hester he has found “the only woman I have ever seen whom I would make my wife” (Thackeray, 1996, p. 69), but this unconvincing gloss cannot disguise that this is not a very laudable or attractive picture she is conjuring. Not only that, it is one that narratively and dramatically is almost impossible to reconcile with the happy ending she is impelled to impose on her characters. It might be reasonable to wonder, then, why it is there.

Perhaps in this discrepancy, the glaring gap between the action Thackeray records and the imposed meaning she tries to give it, lies the real source of her need to write this book, the source of some of the “frustration” she was apparently “pouring out” when she first sat down to write it, and indeed perhaps even Dodgson’s role as catalyst. She tells us Hexham is a man in love, but he simply does not behave like one. He behaves in fact with the amused detachment of a man whose emotions are not involved at all, who is either deliberately playing with Hester or entirely oblivious to the effect he is having. She tells us Hester is “angry” with him and is accustomed to blind devotion from her suitors, but she comes across as merely naïve, bewildered and humiliated: an innocent girl who is unlikely to have had much experience of male attention at all.

The implication is that the painful aspect of Hester’s emotional journey is the one closest to Anne Thackeray’s heart; she writes a powerful and seemingly very genuine exposition of a naïve woman who experiences a private humiliation at the hands of a man who has either by accident or design persuaded her to believe she is the recipient of genuine ‘attentions’ when she is not. Thackeray reports this experience with stark honesty, recording every twinge of embarrassment, every moment of pain and confusion that Hester experiences at the hands of the man. In contrast, the image of the ‘happy ending’, the mutual love and the engagement seem forced on the story-line and do not quite read as true. It is as though this image of raw pain and embarrassment was almost too painful for Thackeray to allow it to remain untouched. To soothe herself she gives us motives for her protagonists that redeem them both. She ‘pours out’ an experience of unhappy love and private humiliation, while at the same time relocating the experience into something more positive and thus ‘exorcising’ a sense of pain.

There seems to be a great honesty and poignancy in her picture of a love that nearly happens but then seems doomed simply to fizzle away:

It was a curious reluctant attraction that seemed to unite these two people who loved each other and yet were cold; and who were playing with their best chance of happiness and wilfully putting it away. (Thackeray, 1996, p. 69)

The possibility that this 'love' exists on one side only, which in fact seems to offer the best explanation of almost everything that she records as happening between Hester and her beloved Hexham, is of course the one thing that Thackeray finds entirely inadmissible and this in itself might tell us a great deal. This cannot of course tell us why has she chosen to use Charles Dodgson in fictional form as the means of expressing this, but it does offer up possibilities that may or may not be significant.

COINCIDENCE OF SUNSETS

The decade during which *From an Island* was begun, the 1860s, was a period during which Charles Dodgson began to write what seems to have been his only extant love poetry, during a time of spiritual and mental turbulence that has never yet been satisfactorily explained. Interestingly from the point of view of this analysis, there are apparent textual similarities between two of these poems and a passage from *From an Island*. Compare this passage from Thackeray's novel:

...He found himself in the dusky garden again, where the lights were almost put out by this time, though all the flowers were glimmering, and scenting, and awake still. There was a red streak in the sky; all the people had vanished, but turning round he saw – he blinked his eyes at the sight – a white figure standing, visionary, mystical, in the very centre of a bed of tall lilies, in a soft gloom of evening light. Was it a vision? For the first time in his life Hexham felt a little strangely: as if he could believe in the super-nature which he had sometimes scoffed at. The young man made one step forward and stopped again. "It is I, Mr Hexham", said a shy clear voice. "I came to find some flowers for Emilia". It was Hester's voice. Surely some kind providence sets true lovers' way in pleasant places, and all they do and say has a grace of its own which they impart to all inanimate things. The evening, the sweet stillness, the trembling garden hedges, the fields beyond, the sweet girlish tinkle of Hester's voice, made Hexham feel for the first time in his life as if he was standing in a living shrine, and as if he ought to fall down on his knees and worship. "Can I help you?" he said. "Miss Hester, may I have a flower for my buttonhole?" "There are nothing but big lilies", said the voice. (Thackeray, 1996, pp. 33-4)

With this from Dodgson's poem, 'The Three Sunsets':

He saw her once, and in the glance

A moment's glance of meeting eyes,

His heart stood still in sudden trance

He trembled with a sweet surprise—

All in the waning light she stood

The star of perfect womanhood

That summer eve his heart was light

With lighter step he trod the ground

And life was fairer in his sight

And music was in every sound

He blessed the world where there could be

So beautiful a thing as she

(Carroll 1939, p. 849)

Thackeray and Dodgson evoke the same series of images – the sunset (a recurring symbolic theme whenever Dodgson writes about blighted love and subsequent renewal – it also finds its way into his novel *Sylvie and Bruno*), the summer evening, the sense of surprise and almost holy awe coupled with falling overwhelmingly in love. There are also echoes in Thackeray's work of the invocation of the supernatural ("was it a vision?") that haunts so much of Dodgson's writing, particularly his most personal love poems. Indeed the invocation of dreamlike headiness, the flower-symbolism, the waiting female who waylays a man on his journey are all to be found again in another poem of Dodgson's love cycle, 'Stolen Waters' (1862):

**The light was soft, and faint the air
That breathed upon the place;
And she was lithe and tall and fair,
And with a wayward grace
Her queenly head she bare –
With glowing cheek, with gleaming eye,
She met me on the way;
My spirit owned the witchery
Within her smile that lay;
I followed her, I know not why.
The trees were thick with many a fruit,
The grass with many a flower;
My soul was dead, my tongue was mute
In that accursed hour.
(Carroll 1939, p. 863)**

Is this an accident of two authors dipping into the same jar of common Victorian imageries? Or is Thackeray in 1868-77 deliberately referencing Dodgson's love poetry, written and published some years before? The earlier version of Dodgson's poem 'Dream of Fame' was published in *College Rhymes* in October 1861; it was then apparently almost immediately rewritten and re-named 'The Three Sunsets' in November of the same year, though it wasn't published in its new form until 1869, in his collection of poetry entitled *Phantasmagoria*. 'Stolen Waters' followed its predecessor into *College Rhymes* in the summer of 1862, and was also republished in *Phantasmagoria*. So, by the time Thackeray began writing *From an Island* in 1868, both poems had already appeared in print, and Thackeray may therefore simply be using a printed source in order to offer a literary homage to her Carroll. But we cannot totally discount other possibilities, including a possible common source for both passages in real experience.

As so often, we have questions and possibilities, but few real answers. The friendship between Thackeray and Dodgson, which persisted during the early and mid-1870s, seems to have lapsed rather after Thackeray's marriage. Dodgson did not, for example, meet Thackeray's new husband, though he did recall, some years later, meeting her daughter Hester when she was a baby. One letter seems to survive from later years. Apparently on 13 January, 1887, Thackeray wrote to Dodgson, presumably after a lapse of contact of some years, inviting him to "come and dine and sleep and renew old acquaintance" (Cohen, 1979, II, p. 686).

It may or may not be potentially significant for this enquiry that Thackeray attempted to "renew old acquaintance" during what was a difficult period of her marriage. She had

quite recently discovered her husband's affair with another woman. It was a time when a woman might think about comforting herself with the presence of an old admirer, or at least a pleasant and attractive companion from the past to salve wounded self-esteem. But if this was possibly her idea, it didn't work out for her as, rather ungallantly, Dodgson did not even reply for nearly ten months, by which time her marriage-crisis was passed, her husband back in the family home and repentant.

So, in sum, what does this collection actually add up to? Sadly, nothing very solid at all. We have an autobiographical novel written by Anne Thackeray, featuring people intensely beloved by her, including Tennyson, Julia Margaret Cameron, and, apparently anomalously, Charles Dodgson. We have a few letters and diary entries of Dodgson's concerning Thackeray, none of which throw any light at all on why he features so intimately in her novel. We have some interesting textual comparisons between Dodgson's poetry and passages from the novel. These things may seem to suggest possibilities, but without any firmer data they could also lead us wildly astray.

In the end we are left with the question we began with – What is Charles Dodgson doing in this very personal and intimate novel written by a woman to celebrate people and a place she loved very much?

It seems we really have no answer at this time. We know why Tennyson and Cameron and Margy and G.F. Watts are there. But the historical record doesn't seem to give any reason why of all people she lifted Charles Dodgson out of the ether and placed him in her fiction as a carefully studied, well-observed love-object. We have to assume that reasons existed in her heart, or in the reality of the exchanges between them, that we have lost all access to. Our lack of knowledge here should probably act as a timely warning against assuming we ever know, or ever can know, everything about Lewis Carroll, Charles Dodgson or any other human life. Perhaps it is only right that this is so.

REALITY OR FANTASY?

To the second question – How 'real' is Thackeray's pen-portrait of Lewis Carroll? – we can perhaps do a slightly better job of answering in more certain terms.

The introduction of flagrant and gothic fiction in the dreadful tale of Captain Sigourney shouldn't persuade us that her evocation of the real people in her story is per se any less honest or reliable. On the contrary, the very uneasiness of the join between the passages of outright and rather half-hearted 'Fiction' with a Victorian capital 'F' and the much richer episodes from the original MS only serve to show how reluctant Thackeray seems to have been to dilute or corrupt the purity of her original work. The main purpose of her novel remained

for her the celebration of her memories of the Isle of Wight and the people she loved there. As her granddaughter unequivocally states, she was "expressing her devotion":

If the reader persists they will experience through the prism of Anny's eyes and memory the certainty of dining at Mrs Cameron's table; they will hear G. F. Watts's comments on painting and his delicate snub to the obnoxious self-invited guest. They will watch while a matchless photograph is produced by co-operation. They will climb up to the Beacon below where Tennyson's Cross now stands and watch the "band of fire on the sea..." (Thackeray, 1996, p. 5)

The "obnoxious self-invited guest" is Lewis Carroll, and there is, currently, no reason to suppose her portrait of him is intended to be any less lifelike and real. Indeed, in many particulars it is easily recognisable even to modern readers as a portrait of young Charles.

Like Dodgson, Hexham is a photographer. In a thin disguise, Hexham hails from "Christ's College Cambridge", while Dodgson was from Christ Church, Oxford. Hexham is tall, dark-haired and attractive, though his hair is described as "close-cropped" which doesn't

seem to apply to Dodgson's rather flowing style. Like Dodgson he is touchy and rather easily offended. And in a very Carrollian aside he is glimpsed playing a little game of racing raindrops with the children of the house (Thackeray, 1996, p. 42).

These aspects are very easy for modern readers to recognise as belonging to our image of Lewis Carroll, but other things seem to have little to do with the shy "dreamer of children", most particularly Thackeray's analysis of Hexham's personality. Throughout the novel this is explored repeatedly and in some detail and though there are familiar and quite Carroll-like aspects in his hints of sensitivity and spirituality, the portrait is uniformly one of energy, drive, determination and a certain hardness tempered by charm. Hexham is:

... rapid, determined: so sure of himself that he could afford not to be sure of others (Thackeray, 1996, p. 57).

... a young man of an impatient humour. He was a little hard as young men are apt to be. But there was something reassuring in his very hardness and faith in himself and his own doings. It was reassuring because it was a genuine expression of youthful strength and power. No bad man could have had that perfect confidence which marked most of George Hexham's sayings and doings. He was, after all, the complacency of good intentions (Thackeray, 1996, p. 66)

... so unused to being opposed that [when he was] his indignation knew no bounds (Thackeray, 1996, p. 56)

He has a nature that can be possessed with "L'esprit moqueur" – the spirit of mockery. After dinner one evening, he is outrageously rude to his host:

Altogether it was a dismal disjointed evening, during which a new phase of Hexham's character was revealed to us, and it was not the best or the kindest. There was a hard look in his handsome face and sceptical tone in his voice. He seemed possessed by what the French call L'esprit moqueur. Hester, pained and silenced at last, would scarcely answer him when he spoke. Her father with an effort got up and took a book and began to read something out of one of Wordsworth's sonnets... Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart, Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea. "I hate Wordsworth. He is always preaching", said Hexham, as St Julian ceased reading. "I never feel so wicked as when I am being preached at." (Thackeray, 1996, p. 62)

Such images seem on the face of it totally alien to the reclusive, shy clergyman who preferred to hide away from the world, which is the image of Carroll we are used to thinking of as real. Likewise Hexham's interactions with women, as recorded above, seem to have nothing to do with a man who, we have always been told, avoided adult society and focused all his emotional and sexual attention on children. In this novel 'Lewis Carroll' falls in love with the heroine, Hester, and she with him, but he does not treat her well. He beguiles her, only to flounce off in a temper when she seems to reject him, and then play her off rather ungallantly against another woman. This image of a confident, assertive Lewis Carroll, playing the 'gallant' and flirting with pretty women and being found very attractive by them seems to touch pure absurdity in our minds. Yet it is this that Thackeray offers us:

"You are not going? Do stay", said Hexham imploringly: "I want you: I want a picture of you all to myself. I told my man we should come back after luncheon." Hester coloured up. Her mother's warning was still in her ears. "I – I am afraid I must go", she said shyly. "What nonsense!", cried Hexham, who was perfectly unused to contradiction, and excited by his success. "I shall go and tell your mother that it is horrible tyranny to send you off with that corvee of children and women, and that you want to stay behind. Lady Jane would stay if I asked her" (Thackeray, 1996, p. 55)

He first thought of remaining behind, and showing his displeasure by a haughty seclusion. But Lady Jane happened to drive up with Aileen in the pony-carriage she had hired, feathers flying, gauntleted, all prepared to conquer. "Won't you come with us, Mr. Hexham?", she said, in her most gracious tone. After a moment's hesitation, Hexham jumped in, for he saw Hester standing not far off, and he began immediately to make himself as agreeable as he possibly could to his companion. It was not much that happened that afternoon, but trifles show which way the wind is blowing. Lady Jane and her cavalier went first, the rest of us followed in Mrs St Julian's carriage... (Thackeray, 1996, p. 56)

This is an image virtually impossible to reconcile with what we have come to believe Carroll was. It is reasonable to wonder what is going on here – why the seemingly absurd and inappropriate behaviour has been awarded to Carroll in this way. Is Thackeray using very large amounts of dramatic licence?

This has certainly been the conclusion of the tiny handful of Carroll scholars who have bothered to examine *From an Island* at all (see, for example, Bakewell, 1996, pp. 198-9). But it has never seemed very plausible. Why, in a novel otherwise devoted to celebrating the characters of real people she loved, would Thackeray import a real person she knew – Charles Dodgson – and then alter his character so absolutely that it simply bore no relationship to him at all? And in the light of what we now know about the inaccuracies and myths surrounding our present image of Carroll, is this the most reasonable conclusion?

Might it not be that the Dodgson of his private diaries is not such an impossible fit for the role of Hexham as the power of the Carroll legend might lead us to suppose? True there is no record of his pitting one woman against another, or behaving with the boorish rudeness of the character Thackeray describes, but there is enough available data to show that such activities are not anything like as wildly improbable as has always seemed to be the case.

The 'real Carroll' does indeed seem to have been a rather assertive, even pushy individual, with a considerable amount of chutzpah and self-belief. The record of his dealings with his contemporaries shows a man of strong opinions and some determination, who generally seemed to succeed in getting his own way in situations, even with those who were superior to him in social standing and age. At the age of twenty-five he was bold and confident enough simply to arrive on the doorstep of the Poet Laureate without invitation, and expect to be invited in and shown around (which indeed he was).

The 'real Carroll' was focused and ambitious, and had no qualms about sending his photographs and writings to the very highest in the land, in a bid to get himself established and 'independent' in Society. He was a shameless networker, to use modern imagery, and would quite brazenly use his contacts to make other, higher contacts, in an assiduous bid to climb the artistic ladder. Having, for example, acquired an introduction to the sculptor Alexander Munro, he was almost immediately planning how he could get an introduction from him to the writer Tom Taylor and from Taylor to Kate Terry and her sister Ellen, the two actresses he had for many years admired from afar and longed to meet. Taylor in fact proved particularly useful, because it was through him also that Dodgson won an introduction to the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the artist John Tenniel, who of course ended up illustrating *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Dodgson was also adept at buttonholing ladies-in-waiting or other officials of the Royal Court to try to persuade the Queen and her family to admire his photographs. True, he was sometimes rebuffed, and heavily so, for his near-impudence in pushing forward, but he rarely let such rebuffs deter him, and usually got up and tried again, with another contact. Anne Thackeray's description of Hexham "rapid, determined: so sure of himself that he could afford not to be sure of others", is perhaps not that misplaced a description for a man who behaved like this – and indeed Anne would have had very personal experience of Dodgson's self-confident self-advancement. In 1857 Dodgson used this

technique to persuade a mutual acquaintance in Oxford to introduce him to Anne's father. (Wakeling, III, p. 57)

There is also ample evidence (as has been extensively shown elsewhere by both myself and Hugues Lebaillly) in Dodgson's letters and diaries of a man very much at home in the company of women. Far from being reluctant to engage with any female over the age of fourteen, as the legend has always insisted, Dodgson willingly, even eagerly, sought friendships with grown women, some even older than himself. He was quite clearly greedy for female admiration, and seemed to need a constant supply of different females, whether little girls or grown women, to gratify his need to be sufficiently loved and admired. His surviving letters display a warm, congenial flirtatiousness in dealing with these women-friends that is far less difficult to reconcile with Hexham's handling of the two women in this story than the vivid myth of the child-loving and inadequate clergyman.

Moreover, women seem to have been drawn to him, possibly by his gentleness and his apparent ability to empathise with the female condition. He seems to have had a rare ability to make any girl or woman he was with feel very special and uniquely favoured, and he doesn't seem to have been reluctant to ply that ability when he wanted to. There is no overt evidence that Dodgson ever actually behaved in the fickle flirtatious way Hexham behaves, but the apparent reality of his life and personality, his nearly obsessive search for the love of girls and women, his tendency to 'collect' their adoration like some sort of quasi-Don Juan, certainly doesn't rule out the possibility in the way that the mythic image seems to.

And what of the surly "hard" young man sneering at Wordsworth? – "I hate Wordsworth. He is always preaching ... I never feel so wicked as when I am being preached at" – The choice of that particular poet is, after all, interesting, for we know that Dodgson seems to have had rather an ambivalent response to Wordsworth's poetry. The older Dodgson may have claimed to admire him, but the younger man had a suspicion of all poetry with 'morals', and Wordsworth was his focus of satire on that account more than once. Not only was 'Sitting on a Gate', from *Through the Looking-Glass*, a satire on Wordsworth's very preachy 'Resolution and Independence', but the same poem is gently sent up in the mock-heroic names of the two boys in 'Photographer's Day Out'. Indeed it is worth comparing Dodgson's words in a letter to his uncle Hassard with the words Thackeray gives to Hexham. Dodgson wrote on May 14 1872:

'Sitting on a Gate' is a parody ... its plot is borrowed from Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence', a poem that has always amused me a good deal (though it is by no means a comic poem) by the absurd way in which the poet goes on questioning the poor old leech-gatherer, making him tell his history over and over again, and never attending to what he says. Wordsworth ends with a moral – an example I have not followed (Cohen, 1979, I, p. 177).

There is more than a faint echo here of Hexham's "I hate Wordsworth. He is always preaching". Indeed, as with so much else, it has tended to be overlooked that there was an enduring aspect of Dodgson that was able to be extremely barbed. Far from the enduringly sweet-natured man of legend, 'the real Carroll' could be devastatingly slighting when he wished to be. He sometimes delighted to tease his friends to a pitch that was almost hurtful. His satirical pamphlets on college politics and some of his polemic in his last novel *Sylvie and Bruno* show a sophisticated humorist who wasn't afraid to be quite cruel and very wittily so, at the expense of his colleagues, political opponents, or anyone he happened to dislike or disagree with; sardonic observation and comment was a very central part of his non-mythic persona. <

The character of Arthur in *Sylvie and Bruno*, widely accepted as an expression of Carroll's own persona, keeps up an almost non-stop commentary on the various comical or reprehensible defects in all those about him, with everyone from teetotalers to blue-stockings coming in for his sarcasms and his sometimes devastatingly witty contempt. The man who could dismiss a worthy young lady as being "as sweet as eau sucre and about as interesting" (Carroll, 1939, p.552), is perhaps not 'Carroll', but he is Dodgson.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Thackeray's portrait of Dodgson was – as would seem only logical – quite as accurate as her portraits of Tennyson, Julia Margaret Cameron, G. F. Watts et al. In *Hexham* she has given us what seems to be a very closely analysed portrait of a human personality full of insight and generosity. If it were presented as a word picture of any other Victorian then we would have no difficulty in accepting its authenticity: we baulk because she is describing 'Carroll', the sacred and the mythic. But it might be that we need to learn to incorporate such images as Thackeray paints of caustic 'sceptical' very un-Carroll-like conduct as being a part of what Lewis Carroll actually was.

When we look at it, Hexham's mocking comment on Wordsworth: "I hate Wordsworth. He is always preaching ...I never feel so wicked as when I am being preached at." is like 'Carroll' through a distorting glass. Perhaps this is because what we have here is 'Carroll', but grown-up; 'Carroll' without the veneer of saintliness and impossible sweetness; 'Carroll' observed and described by an astute 25 year old woman as he was before he actually became 'Carroll'. The question of what this novel tells us about the relationship between Dodgson and Anne Thackeray is problematic. The novel gives us a deep reading of a girl's journey through innocent first love to hurt and bewilderment, to a rather more forced and perfunctory 'happy ending'. That such a journey was close to Thackeray's heart can be surmised; that Charles Dodgson was equally meaningful can also be surmised by his very presence in her most personal work. Further than this we cannot go.

But even if we continue to be unable to give reasons why Lewis Carroll is celebrated in *From an Island* it doesn't justify our continuing to ignore it, as it has been ignored. At the very least, this is an interesting fictionalised word portrait of the young Carroll, painted by a shrewd and intelligent woman. It was a portrait that indeed resided on Dodgson's own bookshelf. If he read it and, given its connection with him as well as his passionate admiration for her work, it would seem highly improbable that he didn't, then he could hardly have failed to recognise his own portrait so intensely and closely painted. Doubtless he knew the story that lay behind its construction as we probably never will. But it is still an interpretation of Dodgson by a woman he uniquely admired as a fellow artist, if in no other way; a portrait drawn before the complex alternative persona of Carroll had begun the relocation and corruption of memory. It therefore has immense literary and biographical interest, and with the demise of the narrow mythic image of what 'Carroll' was, the time might be right to begin to explore what Thackeray is saying about the man who wrote Alice.

From an Island by Anne Thackeray, published by Hunnyhill Publications, Isle of Wight