

The Curious Case of the Wasp in the Wig

by Karoline Leach



In 2005 I managed to persuade the then-owner of the “Wasp in a Wig” galley proofs to agree to a collection of tests to establish the authenticity of this alleged missing chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* .

It was very exciting. We had a team of experts ready to begin the work in London once we had managed to figure how to transport the precious cargo from the United States. For the first time in 36 years we were going to get the chance to prove this mysterious document really was what it claimed to be - a unique piece of long-missing Carrolliana.

But, without warning and at the last minute, the owner decided the time wasn't right and pulled out of the project. The experts were told to stand-down. The tests were canceled.

A few months later – in a completely unrelated move - the Wasp was put up for sale at [Christie's](#). The estimated sale-price was \$60 -70,000.

I have not tried to contact the new owner and I have no information that any of the proposed tests to establish the Wasp's authenticity have been done in the ten years since.

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The history of Lewis Carroll's allegedly rediscovered chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass* is a strange and fascinating one. It began, with little fanfare in July 1974, when a startling announcement appeared quietly in the sales catalogue of Sotheby's London auction room:

The Property of a Gentleman.

76. DODGSON (C.L.) "Lewis Carroll". GALLEY PROOFS FOR A SUPPRESSED PORTION OF "THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS", slip 64-67 and portions of 63 and 68, with autograph revisions in black ink and note in the author's purple ink that the extensive passage is to be omitted.

*** *The present portion contains an incident in which Alice meets a bad-tempered wasp, incorporating a poem of five stanzas, beginning "When I was young my ringlets waved". It was to have appeared following "A very few steps brought her to the edge of the brook" on page 183 of the first edition. The proofs were bought at the sale of the author's furniture, personal effects, and library, Oxford, 1898, and are apparently unrecorded and unpublished.*

This was a seismic event in literary circles. For more than seventy years it had been understood that there had been an extra and now missing portion of Lewis

Carroll's second Alice story, due to a somewhat cryptic and tantalising reference in a letter from 'Alice' illustrator John Tenniel to Charles Dodgson dated June 1, 1870:

*"My Dear Dodgson: ...Don't think me brutal, but I am bound to say that the 'wasp' chapter does not interest me in the least, and I can't see my way to a picture. If you want to shorten the book, I can't help thinking – with all submission – that this is your opportunity. In an agony of haste, Yours sincerely,
J. Tenniel"*

Nothing further had ever been discovered about this mysterious 'wasp chapter'. Since no trace of it was evident in Carroll's papers, or anywhere else, it was assumed the text was lost, leaving a litter of unanswered and unanswerable questions trailing:

Where had this mysterious insect originally been located ?

How had it fitted into the story?

And what sort of creature had this 'wasp' been?

For years scholars speculated on these things, with many conflicting theories being advanced.

Then, in 1974, the above announcement appeared in Sotheby's catalogue and the world learned that what purported to be the [galley proofs of this long lost chapter](#) were suddenly being sold in a London auction room.

As can be imagined this caused a mini-sensation. Carrollians gathered from many corners of the globe for the sale on July 3 1974. Since no other *Alice* galley proofs had ever been found, some just wanted to catch a sight of this treasure trove. Others were there to try and get the treasure for themselves. The galleys were eventually sold to a New York book dealer called John Fleming, for £1700. It later developed that Fleming was acting as an agent [Norman Armour jr](#) of New York.

People hoped the new owner might put the galleys on display, or allow scholars to examine them, but sadly this didn't happen. After the sale the Wasp was whisked into a vault, locked away from the eager attention of Carrollians and literary scholars.

and she was just going to spring over, when she heard a deep sigh, which seemed to come from the wood behind her.

"There's ~~somebody~~ ^{looking anxiously} very unhappy there," she thought, ~~and she went a little way back~~ ^{again} to see what was the matter. Something like a very old man (only that his face was more like a wasp) was sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree, all huddled up together, and shivering as if he were very cold.

omit to middle of slip 62

There was some speculation this might have been because the new owner was a little less than confident about his new acquisition's *bona fides*. After all, there were obvious problems. Most notably the fact that the alleged provenance claimed in the sales catalogue - "*the proofs were bought at the sale of the author's furniture, personal effects, and library*", was extremely doubtful, since no record of such a sale existed.

This, and other issues we'll explore in more detail below, provoked a lot of suspicion, and this was possibly why the sales price had been

rather on the low side - £1,700 in 1974 currency. In January 1978, Evert Gherardts expressed the feeling of many when he published the following commentary in the Dutch magazine *Furore*:

"it must be a deception...it was not known who had owned the proofs...neither was the name known of the person who had offered those 'galley proofs' at Sotheby's..."

In the same year the Lewis Carroll Society of Great Britain held a special Symposium to discuss 'Wasp' and Gherardts' doubts were echoed and added to by several leading members, most notably Selwyn Goodacre.

Objections and questions were raised on numerous aspects from the poor quality of the writing, to the identification of the handwriting and –repeatedly – the assigned provenance, all of which were found to be at least dubious, and calls were made for scientific testing of the paper, the ink and the type to be done.

Despite all this, *nothing* happened. I can't say if any approaches were made to the owner, but I can say that no expert examination of the galleys, the ink, the paper, or the handwriting was done at all.

In response to this spectacular non-response, the most skeptical Carrollians gradually gave up calling for the Wasp to be examined more thoroughly, while several of the least skeptical and more imprudent began to behave as if such tests were simply not needed. As if the Wasp was proved to be genuine simply by being there.

Not long after the sale the new owner granted permission for a facsimile to be published by the Lewis Carroll Society of North America, and this was the beginning of a pretty high profile and celebrated literary career for the wiggy Wasp. It appeared in several editions of *Through the Looking-Glass*, 'reinstated' - with what we could call rather breathtaking hubris - in its presumed original position. It was included in a prestigious TV dramatization in 1998. It was the subject of several critical analyses by high profile Carrollians such as Martin Gardner and Morton Cohen, and was illustrated - very beautifully - by Ralph Steadman.

None of these prestigious ventures questioned for a moment that the 'Wasp in a Wig' was anything but what it claimed to be. Few even discussed the question of its authenticity, let alone remembered there might be doubts.

And so it remains.

Google 'Wasp in the Wig' today and you'll find very little reason to think it's anything but the real deal. You'll turn up hits for its several publications, and for numerous articles detailing how the 'lost' galleys came to be found, all telling the Sotheby's provenance story as if it was an established fact. You'll find the details of the re-sale at Christie's in 2005, again putting across the same provenance - though qualifying it with a rather disingenuous, if prudent, 'presumably'. But if you're like me, you'll find only *two* sites even acknowledging the fact this document has *never* been examined or established to be genuine.

Forty-one years after it first emerged from the collection of the mysterious unnamed "gentleman", the Wasp in the Wig remains essentially an unknown quantity. While a few experts have looked at the facsimile and felt able to endorse it on this basis alone, not a single one has ever examined the original artefact. Or at least if any have they have not published their results. No one has tested the paper, compared magnifications of the type face with authentic *Looking-Glass* first

editions, compared the handwriting with Dodgson's. No one has dated and analysed the ink.

Which raises the question – what actually is the “Wasp in a Wig”?

The **two** major areas of concern over its authenticity are -

1) lack of provenance prior to its appearance in the Sotheby's saleroom in 1974

This is, of course, a crucial problem and one of the strongest indicators of possible fakery. The story of its origin offered in the Sotheby's catalogue was simply false. Nothing purporting to be galleys for the missing “wasp chapter” had been sold at the auction of Dodgson's effects in 1898. Indeed no record of any surviving galleys from the *Alice* books has ever been recorded anywhere. Neither was there any record of the ‘wasp chapter’ ever having been in the Dodgson family papers, or sold by them into private hands in the years after Carroll's death. Dodgson's nephew and first biographer, Stuart Collingwood, who had full access to his uncle's papers, and quotes the Tenniel letter in his biography, had never seen or heard of these galleys.

So, where did this artifact really come from? And where had it spent the previous 76 years before turning up for sale, courtesy of a 'gentleman' who preferred not to be identified?

As of 2015 these questions are still awaiting solid answers.

2) its quality

Frankly, “Wasp in a Wig” is *bad*. The language is clunky, and in some places gives an unnerving impression of being a sort of Alice-pastiche. Unnerving because writers rarely if ever pastiche themselves. The poems barely scan, and this is potentially significant as an indicator, because even at his worst, in the depths of his most cloying poetic banality, Carroll knew how to turn a graceful metre. His poems were technically precise even when artistically mediocre. So if Carroll wrote this he was not just being bad he was being bad in a fairly uncharacteristic way. This, even without the above issues, is a reason for caution.

Other alleged problems are more open to debate. Does this 'lost chapter' fit with Carroll's 'illustration plan' for *Looking-Glass* discovered some while ago? Some argue it does, some that it doesn't. Does the handwriting resemble Carroll's? The examples are so small - just a couple of words - it's hard to say, especially as no handwriting expert has yet been allowed to examine the text.

Understandably, there are now a lot of people with an investment in not opening this particular can of worms. The current owner doesn't want to see his/her investment turn to dust (after all, who would?). The various experts who have endorsed it don't want to risk their reputations if it turns out to be a hoax. The various collectors don't want their valuable limited edition 'Wasp' facsimiles to become nothing but the Carrollian equivalent of the Hitler Diaries. Forty-one years on is there any motive left for investigating this orphaned insect? Indeed, in a world of ISIS and Austerity what does it matter?

Well, yes, you can argue that. But I think it does continue to matter. Even if we don't think truth should be pursued for its own sake, I think we owe more to the author of the immortal *Alice* than to simply throw this rather shoddy artifact in with his works of genius without at least being certain he really was the unforgivably clumsy perpetrator.

And the harsh truth is that until the whole document is given over to scientific analysis, we *can't* be certain of that. Until that time, it remains quite possible the much-vaunted, much-published "Wasp in a Wig", is a fraud. Another in the proud history of belatedly-discovered literary lacunae that turned out to be embarrassing fakes. A yet-to-be-denounced Carrollian Oath of a Freeman.

I suggest this possibility needs to be addressed and - hopefully - dismissed as soon as possible.