

CARROLL'S 'CONSERVATISM'

by John Tufail

It has long been popularly held that, in gross contradiction to the fanciful mentality of his stories, Lewis Carroll himself was an ultraconservative personality in his every-day life. However, evidence recently discovered, some from his unpublished personal diaries, now reveals that this label as a traditionalist was likely an oversimplified and misleading construct.

The decade of Carroll's birth, the 1830s, was a decade of pain and controversy for the Church of England. It was a period when the established Bishops were conservative, intransigent and self-serving. (The Bishop of Ely, for example) was drawing a stipend of £50,000 a year while many of his parishioners were starving to death).

With the Church losing adherents in droves, a group of young churchmen reacted against this corruption and a loose movement, based mainly at Oxford University, and thus called the 'Oxford Movement', began to challenge the complacency of the established hierarchy with a series of letters, pamphlets and articles. This movement, though never fully agreeing within itself on many major theological principles, was united enough and determined enough to effect major reforms in the way the Church conducted its pastoral affairs and the disagreements within the movement itself had the advantage of creating serious theological debate within the Church which shook it out of its complacency. As will become significant later on, Carroll's father was a supporter of the Oxford Movement.

By the mid-1840s the confusion of the earlier period had more or less left the Anglican Church in a position where three issues could be identified as the main areas of debate. These were 'Ritualism', 'Liberalism' and 'Christian Socialism'. Each of these movements had passionate and powerful supporters.

It was the debates, dialogues and controversies involving these movements that most relate to Carroll's experiences at Oxford. Carroll, people may be surprised to know, was aligned most firmly in many ways with the last of these - the Christian Socialists. His politics were very personal but in many ways very radical, though this has escaped the attention of generations of biographers who have been misled by accidents of nomenclature.

An error which many commentators on Victorian England have made is to see the socio-political struggles of this period in terms of a simple continuum. It is a view which sees the various brands of 'Socialism' on the left, Liberalism in the Centre and the different strands of Conservatism on the right. When applied to Lewis Carroll, this model becomes even more simplified. They present the issue as polarised between on the one side the 'cause of reform', represented by Liberals like Dean Liddell and Arthur Stanley, and on the other the forces of 'Conservatism' as represented by 'stick-in-the muds' like Edward Pusey and of course, Charles Dodgson. A typical example of this representation can be found in Alexander Taylor's uneven critical biography, *The White Knight*, (parenthesis added):

Long before (the Christ Church Oxford Act), however, the Dean (The new Dean, Dr Liddell, Liberal appointee and father of Alice) had swept old Keys out of the cathedral, dog-whip, beer and all, and, after extensively altering the building, re-opened it to the general public. Dodgson scarcely knew what to make of it all. Many of the Dean's proposals were bound to improve his own standing at Christ Church, and when carried out actually did so. But he had liked things slack and quaint, governed by use and want rather than reason. On the whole his sympathies were with the departed Dean Gaisford, with Dr Pusey and the old guard. His political opinions, after wavering slightly in the year 1856, set permanently Conservative. He had been reading *Alton Locke* and was briefly stirred by the plight of the industrial masses and even by the possibility of doing something to improve matters.

This can be seen as typical of the way that Carroll's politics are usually represented: quaint, old-fashioned, backward-looking. There are some relatively minor, and perhaps understandable errors of a throwaway nature, such as the last sentence in the first paragraph ('...*his sympathies were with the departed Dean Gaisford, with Dr Pusey and the old guard*'). This is actually rather misleading, implying as it does that Dr Pusey and 'the old guard', were, ideologically speaking, synonymous. The fact is that very few of the 'old guard' (and particularly Dean Gaisford) had much sympathy for Dr Pusey's rather radical ideas.

However, the most fundamental error comes at the end of this extract, when Taylor says "His political opinions, after wavering slightly in the year 1856, set permanently Conservative"

In saying that Carroll's political opinions wavered slightly in the year 1856, Taylor points to Carroll's sympathetic reading of Charles Kingsley's novel *Alton Lock*. The implication here is that by reading this impassioned analysis of the suffering of the poor he is turning away from his own conservatism. But the plain fact is that Carroll's sympathetic reading of *Alton Lock* (and passionate diary notes) does *not* betray a wavering of Conservative values, indeed far from it, for Kingsley himself, the author of this passionate plea for social justice was a lifelong Conservative!

What we need to understand is that Conservatism (with a Capital C) during this period was emphatically different in beliefs and ideology that the modern day Conservative Party. It is this crucial fact that most of Carroll's biographers overlook.

Charles Kingsley was a disciple of F. D. Maurice and Christian Socialism. Christian Socialism was a movement derived centrally and, in its formative years at least, fairly uncritically from the Coleridgean strand of High Toryism. The mistake made by Taylor, Cohen and so many other modern analysts comes from a simple transposition of meanings.

'Socialism' as it is understood today incorporates many different forms, but in its common contemporary use is taken to mean that branch of politics furthest away from Conservatism - lying somewhere between Marxism and Liberalism.

However, in the England of the 1840s, 50s and 60s, the political and ideological poles are best seen as Individualism (as represented by the various strands of Liberal philosophy) and the wide spectrum of collectivist ideologies. This includes Conservatism in its various manifestations, the many different forms of "Communism" which existed at the time, Chartism and even Theocratism. During this period, the use of the word 'Socialism', was not considered as belonging to the political left (always an amorphous designation), it was applied to a wide

spectrum of political ideas and ideologies ranging from Rousseau and Proudhon to Robert Owen and Coleridge.

The one unifying concept in these disparate beliefs was that they rejected the Liberal view of Man and Society - the view that any society was nothing more than the sum of its aggregate parts. It can be seen, therefore, that to assume the terms Conservative and Socialist are mutually exclusive is, in the context of 19th c usage of the terms, both unjustified and wholly erroneous. There was, therefore, no incongruity in an Anglican High Churchman and High Tory such as Charles Kingsley calling himself a Socialist. In the same way it was perfectly logical for a radical Tory, founding a new movement based primarily on the ideas expressed in Coleridge's later works to call that movement the Christian Socialist Movement - as, of course, did F.D. Maurice - and as quite probably did Charles Dodgson too.

Carroll was always a Conservative - but perhaps rarely a conservative! And by being Conservative he wasn't allying himself against radicalism, rather he was allying himself with it. The great philosophers of the Conservatives during this period were Carlisle and Coleridge. Ruskin (would you believe!) was a Conservative as well as Kingsley and Maurice. Conservatism was in fact the most radical of political groupings during the period following the Reform Act. They abhorred 'Liberalism' which they felt turned men into brutes and desecrated the land, flora and fauna. They looked back to a period (vaguely medieval) when it was the duty of the Church and the Establishment to ensure the well-being of all their parishioners/subjects (don't forget the word 'Communism' arose from a sense of commune first used to describe an idealised form of medievalism).

It should be amply demonstrated by now that critics who associate Christian Socialism (certainly as it existed in the mid-19th century) with 20th c concepts of Socialism are likely to totally misunderstand the nature and complexity of the early 'socialist' movements. The ideological conflicts during this period simply cannot be seen purely in terms of a polarity between Liberal and Conservative thought. By being a 'Conservative', Carroll was not rejecting 'progress' in the dinosaurian way his biographers often portray. We need to be familiar with this if we are to try and understand the meaning of his political and religious views in the context of his time.

The consequence of the chronic misreading of Carroll's 'Conservatism' for his critics and biographers has been to quite deeply misrepresent the complex reality of his politics and religion and more particularly to ignore a large body of evidence, autobiographical, literary and religious, which points to a synergy between the Coleridgean ideology, and the political and theological views of C.L. Dodgson.