

The Alice Behind Wonderland. By Simon Winchester. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Jan Susina

Simon Winchester has written a modest ninety-six-page study that focuses on the photographic back story of what he calls “one of the most memorable photographic likenesses ever taken” (6): the famous image of the seven-year-old Alice Liddell posed as a beggar-maid, taken by Lewis Carroll in the Deanery Garden in summer 1858. Winchester’s focus on this single photographic image is both an asset and a limitation in this study. I found his *The Professor and the Madman* (1998) a fascinating and popular study of the odd relationship between James Murray and Dr. W. C. Minor, an inmate at an asylum for the criminally insane who became a significant contributor to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. But *The Alice Behind Wonderland* is much less engaging and a bit of a disappointment. For such a slender book, it feels at times padded with tangential information.

Despite the title, Winchester does not provide the reader with any new insights into Alice Liddell, the muse for Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and the model for several

of his best-known child photographs. Readers interested in learning more about her and her relationship with Charles Dodgson would be better served by reading Colin Gordon's *Beyond the Looking Glass: Reflections of Alice and her Family* (1982), Anne Clark's *The Real Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dream Child* (1981), or Morton Cohen's *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (1995). Winchester acknowledges that Carroll scholarship is a rather crowded field, and that the best he hopes to do with this slender volume is to add "minutely to the patina of knowledge" (100). And while the story Winchester tells is well known, he does tell it well.

Rather than a biography of Alice Liddell or a study of Carroll as a writer, this book is a sort of brief photographic history that shows how the three key elements of Lewis Carroll, Alice Liddell, and the Thomas Ottwell Registered Double Folding camera, which Carroll purchased in 1856, all contributed to the production of the memorable photograph in 1858. Alfred, Lord Tennyson called the portrait "the most beautiful photograph he had even seen" (Collingwood 79), which is a bit self-serving, as the photograph is a visual narrative based on his poem "The Beggar Maid." Published in 1842, the poem tells the story of the meeting between the North African King Cophetua and the beggar maid Penelophon. Carroll, along with William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Edward Burne-Jones, used it as an artistic model.

While not a photographic historian, Winchester makes effective use of Roger Taylor and Edward Wakel-

ing's *Lewis Carroll, Photographer: The Princeton University Albums* (2002) and Helmut Gernsheim's *Lewis Carroll, Photographer* (1949) for situating this image within the context of the trends of nineteenth-century photography and Carroll's own sizable collection of photographs taken between 1856 and 1880. While Winchester makes references to other Carroll photographs, he only reproduces the single image in his volume; readers might want to refer to Taylor and Wakeling or Gernsheim while reading this book. But rather than a systematic study of Carroll as a photographer, Winchester provides a digressive meditation on the creation and possible meanings of this single image. His asides are sometimes more informative than his discussions of either Alice or Carroll. For instance, he provides a nice thumbnail description of Frederick Scott Archer, who invented the wet-plate collodion process that Carroll preferred. He also notes that it was Henry Acland, Regius Professor of Medicine, who provided Carroll with his first professional commission photographing the animal skeletons in the Oxford Museum of Natural History, among them that of a dodo. Acland was also the Liddell family doctor.

Winchester views Carroll as the "perfect type-specimen" of the relatively well-born, exceptionally clever member of the intelligentsia drawn to photography in England in the 1850s. Comparing and contrasting the daguerreotype, the calotype, and the wet-plate collodion processes, Winchester shows how the collodion method—Carroll's

preference—helped to democratize Victorian photography. Carroll enthusiastically and consistently used the collodion process because unlike the daguerreotype, it allowed manufacture of multiple prints, and unlike the calotype, it was sensitive to light and had better resolution for details. Likewise, Carroll's selection of the Ottewill Double Folding camera was to have long-reaching effects on the types of photographs he would be able to take, in that its design made it extremely portable and could allow for the creation of images of different sizes. This specific camera model allowed Carroll to use his hobby as a calling card for meeting and photographing famous people and their children. Winchester reminds the reader that given the newness of the medium, photography had a powerful allure in the 1850s, and most Victorians would jump at the chance to have their children photographed. Carroll became an accomplished amateur photographer thanks to his qualities of fastidiousness, organization, and persistence. The camera allowed him to take photographs in the homes of his models, leading to his invitations to the Deanery. Winchester suggests that Carroll's frequent use of the Deanery as a backdrop for his photographs, sometimes without permission, contributed to the friction between him and Mrs. Liddell.

The photographs of Alice Liddell are the most frequently reproduced of the estimated 2,500 images that Carroll took. But Winchester notes that despite the interest in those particular images, they are remarkably few in

number. There are only eleven solo photographs of Alice; as Winchester suggests, "all the fuss and bother that surrounds the relationship between Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell has a mere eleven images to show for it" (74). Similarly, he dismisses the contemporary fascination with Carroll's nude photographs: "only four of these images remain, each now hand-colored and thus rendered inoffensively artistic" (85). If you add the photographs of Alice accompanied by her brother Henry—the first of the Liddell children whom Carroll photographed—or with her sisters Lorina and Edith, this still only increases the number of photographs to eighteen. Winchester observes that Alice Liddell wasn't the first young girl whom Carroll photographed; that honor would go to another Alice, Alice Murdoch, whose portrait was taken in 1856. Nor was Alice Liddell Carroll's most photographed child; he took far more images of Xie Kitchen, whom he met in 1869 and became his favorite model.

But what is lacking in quantity perhaps is made up for in quality. The first photograph Carroll took of Alice Liddell was on 2 June 1857, when she was five years old. The final photograph Carroll took of Alice was in 1870, when she was eighteen. Despite the focus on *The Beggar-Maid*, Winchester finds Carroll's final photograph of Alice to be "by far the most powerful and haunting" (76). While he praises *The Beggar-Maid*, finding it to be a cleverly composed photograph, he deems it only a modest success. He contrasts the two photographs

of Alice: an innocent six-year-old play-acting, with the mature but melancholy young woman about to be launched onto the social scene. The contrast is striking, and Winchester wonders what caused this tragic look of sadness to come over Alice. He finds this final portrait to be the most puzzling, enigmatic, and arresting of all of Carroll's photographs of her. He observes how Alice's subsequent life as Mrs. Hargreaves never quite met the aspirations of her ambitious mother, and how Alice and Carroll kept up a polite but distant relationship during the remainder of their lives.

In addition to Alice's maturation from a young girl into a woman, the other event that occurred between the two photographs of her in 1856 and 1870 was the boating expedition of 4 July 1862, when Carroll first told the story of Alice's adventures, which she subsequently requested he write down for her and which became the core of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865. With the publication of the novel, the meanings of the eleven photographs of Alice by Carroll were permanently and irrevocably altered. They were no longer simply photographs of Alice Liddell, but became portraits of Alice, the dream child.

One of the ironies of Winchester's study, and clearly a disappointment in researching this book, is that he never was allowed to see the original print of *The Beggar-Maid* due to the restrictions of the Parrish Collection, which houses four volumes of Carroll photographs at the Firestone Library of Princeton University. In order to preserve the original, he was allowed to view only a digital reproduction of it.

Photographs are snapshots, frozen moments in time. But time continues to evolve and change, even though photographs seem to magically freeze those moments and make them permanent. By the time Carroll had published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, his fluid and fleeting friendship with Alice Liddell had evolved, just as the meaning of *The Beggar-Maid* had changed. Winchester concludes his study of this famous image with his melancholy observation that, with time, all photographs will eventually fade and vanish. Despite the curatorial protections afforded to the Alice photograph, the image will begin to fade, much like the smile of the Cheshire Cat. But while the original photograph eventually will vanish, the image of Alice in Carroll's photographs and books will endure.

Works Cited

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