

*Artist of Wonderland: The Life, Political Cartoons and Illustrations of Tenniel.* By Frankie Morris. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2005.

Reviewed by Jan Susina

The title of Frankie Morris's recent study of the life and art of John Tenniel suggests the problem faced by any biographer of Tenniel. Tenniel is a bit of an iceberg in terms of his illustrations: he is extremely well known for a very small fraction of his artistic work, which is widely reprinted. He is justly recognized for his ninety-two illustrations that appear in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), but there is so much more to Tenniel's artistic life. An art historian and frequent contributor to *The Carrollian: Lewis Carroll Journal*,<sup>1</sup> Morris tries to rectify this discrepancy in his well-researched biography.

The structure of the book, however, which is published as a volume in the Victorian Literature Culture Series by the University of Virginia Press, acknowledges this dilemma. *Artist of Wonderland* fits somewhere between Roger Simpson's *Sir John Tenniel: Aspects of His Work* (1994), which provides an overview to all of Tenniel's artistic works, and Michael Hancher's *The Tenniel Illustrations*

to the "Alice" Books (1985), which takes a more narrow view, focusing on Tenniel's most famous set of book illustrations. Morris wants to situate Tenniel and his many accomplishments within the larger context of Victorian visual culture and provide a compelling biography of the man whom he considers to be the most accomplished artist who drew on wood for facsimile engraving. But midway through this study, Morris breaks the flow for a series of short, but disjointed, chapters on various aspects of the *Alice* illustrations—"Alice and the Gothic Taste," "The Grotesque Alice," and "Alice and Social Caricature"—that deal with various aspects of the *Alice* books and then returns to his careful analysis of Tenniel's work at *Punch*. It is a curious method to examine the life, political cartoons, and illustrations of Tenniel, but even Morris acknowledges that the *Alice* books stand at the heart of the artist's current reputation. Despite all of the political cartoons that appeared in *Punch*—Morris estimates that Tenniel did more than 3,900 drawings during his fifty-year career with the journal—and the author's attempt to reclaim Tenniel's key role in the creation of popular visual culture during the Victorian period, this study confirms that Tenniel remains for most readers the artist of Wonderland. Tenniel, like Queen Victoria, would not have been amused.

Morris shows that for middle-class Victorians, Tenniel's popularity and influence stemmed from his political cartoons. Before the use of news photographs, illustrations were the key form of visual information for read-

ers and nonreaders. But the cultural contexts for these images have been lost. For most Victorians, the name Tenniel immediately conjured up the weekly big cut—the one- or two-page cartoon that was the central feature of *Punch*—rather than the *Alice* illustrations. According to Morris, while Tenniel “did not invent John Bull, Britannia and the British Lion,” many Victorians assumed that he had (5). Tenniel’s cartoons became “a national institution”; for *Punch*’s middle-class readers, they formed “a history school for the young, a guide for their elders, and a source of patriotic imagery” (246). As Morris argues, the illustrations of *Punch* were not simply read but carefully studied and became for many Victorian youth, including Lewis Carroll, who was an avid fan of *Punch* starting in his teens, a window to the world. So it not surprising that when Carroll contacted Tom Taylor at *Punch* in hopes of meeting his future illustrator, he wrote, “Of all artists on wood I should prefer Mr. Tenniel” (139).

At Tenniel’s death in 1914, the *London Times* considered his drawings “if not the principal, at any rate the most attractive text of modern history known to many of the younger generation” (245). It sometimes comes as a surprise when reading a scholarly text dealing with Victorian social history other than children’s literature to notice Tenniel’s distinctive monogram of a larger *T* crossed with a smaller *I* in the corner of the illustration. If it was an important issue of the day, Tenniel provided a visual commentary in *Punch*. The chief strength of Morris’s study is the careful and detailed

analysis of Tenniel’s political images and messages that appeared in *Punch* rather than Tenniel’s book illustrations, which have been ably examined by Hancher, Edward Hodnett, Richard Kelly, and others. Tenniel held traditional, if not conservative, political beliefs. Morris does not shy away from critiquing some of the more unsavory aspects of Tenniel’s cartoons, including his many comic images of the stage Irishman, the frequent demonizing of the working class, and his use of Sambo and suffering slave stereotypes of African Americans. Given *Punch*’s sympathetic leanings toward the South during the United States Civil War, Tenniel’s cartoons frequently savage Abraham Lincoln.

Tenniel’s two most famous cartoons were “The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger” (1857), which embodies the country’s shock at the news of the massacre of women and children by native troops at Cawnpore, and “Dropping the Pilot” (1890), which featured the dismissed chancellor Bismark leaving the German ship of state under the gaze of the young Kaiser. Tenniel’s fifty-year career as an artist at *Punch* greatly overshadowed his work as a book illustrator. He became the chief political artist in 1862 when John Leech stepped down from the position and only retired in 1901.

While most readers associate Tenniel with the *Alice* illustrations, he felt his sixty-nine designs for the deluxe edition of Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* (1861) were his greatest work in the area of book design. The most original aspect of *Artist of Wonderland*, in terms of the Carroll/Ten-

niel collaboration, is that Morris very convincingly unravels the much-discussed friction between the artist and illustrator of the *Alice* books. Morris points out that much of the information concerning the disagreements over illustrations of the *Alice* books stems from Stuart Dodgson Collingwood's biography *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (1898). Collingwood was born in 1870, the year that Tenniel began working on the illustrations for *Looking-Glass*, so his information had to come from either Carroll's letters or correspondents. Although Tenniel was still alive and actively working at *Punch* when Collingwood wrote his biography of Carroll, he was not contacted, nor did Tenniel keep any of his correspondence with Carroll. Much of Collingwood's information concerning the Carroll/Tenniel relationship came from Harry Furniss, the illustrator of Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* books (1889, 1893). Morris shows that Carroll and Tenniel had much in common—politics, love of theater, and abhorrence of personal publicity. But more importantly, Furniss's alleged quotations from Tenniel complaining about Carroll closely express his own frustrations of working with Carroll, which he would report in *Confessions of a Caricaturist* (1901) and "Recollections of Lewis Carroll," published in the *Strand* in 1908. Indeed, Carroll's working relationship with Furniss was vexed, as it was with many of his other illustrators. Morton Cohen and Edward Wakeling's *Lewis Carroll & His Illustrators: Collaborations & Correspondence, 1865–1898* (2003) confirms this in painful detail. But as Morris notes, Tenniel would have

never called Carroll, who was twelve years younger than himself, "that conceited old Don," but Furniss, who was twenty-two years younger, certainly would and did in his *Confessions of a Caricaturist* (141). Furniss was also the only dissenting voice in the near universal praise of Tenniel that followed his death. Furniss referred to Tenniel as "a man without ideas" in the *Evening News* and went on to criticize the rest of the *Punch* artists he worked with in a subsequent series of articles that ran in *Tit-Bits* (101). Morris fingers Furniss as a source of this malicious misinformation and concludes that the relationship between Carroll and Tenniel was actually one of "gentlemanly association of men matched in social class, taste, and exacting in their respective fields" (155). Another Carroll myth is put to rest.

By 1879 Tenniel has been caricatured by Spy (Leslie Ward) in *Vanity Fair*, which was the Victorian equivalent of having one's photograph taken by Annie Leibovitz for the journal's American namesake. The high esteem in which Tenniel was held was confirmed when he was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1893. This was during the period when knighthood was not handed out nillywilly to every successful pop musician. Tenniel was the first graphic artist who worked primarily in a black-and-white medium to be given this honor. Tenniel said that he accepted the knighthood primarily in the interest of *Punch*, and perhaps he was correct in that by this time he had become synonymous with *Punch*.

There was a great outpouring of public affection for the artist when he retired from *Punch* in 1901. In contrast, when Carroll gave his final lecture at Oxford University in 1881, only two students attended. Ironically, Tenniel retired from *Punch* a week before the death of Queen Victoria, so he was not called upon to draw an image commemorating the event that finalized the passing of an era that he had done so much to visualize. Tenniel's great fear of losing sight in one functional eye—he lost the use of his right eye in a fencing accident with his father when he was a boy—became a reality. By 1907 he would explain: "No, I have not given up drawing. Drawing has given me up" (96). The man who had shown the Victorians their world through his countless *Punch* illustrations spent the final two years of his life blind. Tenniel died in February 1914, but by April of the same year the National Portrait Gallery waived its restriction that a painting could not be hung earlier than ten years following an individual's death by placing Frank Hole's portrait of Tenniel in the collection.

Morris's compelling biography and scholarly examination of Tenniel's illustrations help to reestablish his significant place in Victorian visual culture. In cataloging Tenniel's artistic accomplishments, Morris is in no way attempting to diminish those of Carroll. It would take both an artistic and literary genius working together to create a masterpiece like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

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