The Mystery of Lewis Carroll: Discovering the Whimsical, Thoughtful, and Sometimes Lonely Man Who Created Alice in Wonderland. By Jenny Woolf. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Jan Susina

In *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll*, Jenny Woolf, a London journalist, attempts to provide a more accurate portrait of the famous author of the *Alice* books than that provided by previous critics. Not so much a biography of the author, this study is a series of interlinking chapters that focuses on significant areas of Carroll's life and career: his childhood, his academic career at Oxford University, his religious beliefs, his relationship to children, his relationship to Alice Liddell as a person and muse, his photography, and his finances. In many ways this book, which is based on topics rather than a chronology of the writer's career, resembles Jean Gattegno's *Lewis Carroll: Fragments of a Looking-Glass* (1976), in that Woolf chooses to highlight those subjects that seem to most fascinate readers about Carroll.

While there is little new information in this study, it is a sensible, rather than sensational, look at Carroll. Although the title hints that Woolf will uncover some of the mysteries of Carroll's life, this is really not the case. It might be more accurate to say that Woolf attempts to correct some of the many misunderstandings that have developed around Carroll as the result of previous biographers and critics. As a long-time admirer of the *Alice* books, Woolf was puzzled, if not confused, by the contradictory representations of Carroll found in

various critical studies and decided to set the record straight. Those seeking a sensational version of Carroll will be disappointed, since Woolf rejects most of the suggestions by critics who have attempted to psychoanalyze him or present him as abnormal, a trend that was begun in the 1930s.

Woolf argues that, "it is only fair to judge Carroll by the standards of his time, not ours" (139). She finds him to be an individual who established his own moral limits and tried to live within those self-established boundaries. Carroll's religious beliefs were "absolutely central" to his sense of self (203). Woolf writes that he consistently had a "desperate desire to live a conventionally religious life" (193). However, this created great stress at times for Carroll in that he wanted to accommodate two intense, but conflicting needs: "to believe in God and think logically" (Woolf 186). But this crisis of faith in which Carroll struggled to combine progressive ideas with a traditional religious faith is a hallmark of well-educated Victorians and actually marks Carroll as typical rather than atypical. So after reviewing Carroll's life and work, Woolf finds "not the slightest shred of evidence that he did anything out of line with pre-pubescent girls, and no indication that he had sexual feelings toward them" (139). Instead, Woolf views Carroll's relationships with his young girls as "an antidote to his feelings for women. With his loving child-friends, he could obtain loving, beautiful, feminine company which was neither tempting or 'sinful.'" (139). Woolf solves a mystery, but perhaps not to everyone's satisfaction.

The most original aspect of this study builds off of Woolf's previous book, *Lewis Carroll in His Own Account: The Complete Bank Account of Rev. L. C. Dodgson* (2005). Woolf discovered a large source of original and previously unknown Carroll material—no small scholarly accomplishment—when she located Carroll's Oxford bank account that ran from 1856 to 1900, two years after his death. In her earlier book, Woolf carefully transcribed and annotated this forty-five-year bank account, which does provide a different way of examining the author. In *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll*, Woolf summarizes the key information she found in going through Carroll's financial records.

While Carroll was generally conservative in many of his personal beliefs, he was a bit reckless when it came to money. His bank account frequently went into overdrafts almost from the beginning. Carroll seemed uninterested in saving for the future or increasing his wealth. He was generous to a fault to members of his large family, a number of friends, and various charities throughout his life. Carroll was so generous to some in need, including the family of Thomas Jamieson Dymes, that it forced him into a financial crisis in the 1880s.

What is revealing when going through Carroll's financial records is how modest Carroll's income from both his academic career and books was when compared to successful contemporary children's authors. It is fascinating to discover that he paid John Tenniel £138 for the illustrations of *Wonderland*, which accounted for about a quarter of Carroll's income in 1865. When *Looking-Glass* was published several years later, Tenniel's fee for the illustrations had increased to £290. It is hard to imagine J. K. Rowling paying one fourth of her personal income for the illustrations of the first Harry Potter volume. How times have changed. This information also provides a better context for understanding Carroll's frequent requests for revisions from his illustrators. He had put a substantial portion of his income into these illustrations and wanted them produced to his specifications.

While I find it personally fascinating that Carroll paid a bit over £26 to Arthur Hughes in 1863 for "Lady of the Lilacs," a painting that might have been the model for Carroll's illustrations of Alice in *Under Ground*, I am not convinced that going through Carroll's bank records provides a better understanding of Carroll and his books. Still, Carroll's bank account does shed some light on the details of Carroll's life. For example, when Carroll died, his bank account was overdrawn by £222. This might explain why the family was in such a rush to auction off his books and possessions after his death. It wasn't indifference to Carroll and his memory but a pressing need to pay his debts.

The other small but significant correction that Woolf makes is that Carroll was a mild stammerer rather than a stutterer, who sought out help from James Hunt, a specialist in both stuttering and stammering. Hunt made the distinction between a stammerer who has difficulty with elementary speech sounds and has a hesitating delivery. In contrast, stuttering involves the repetition of initial sounds. Since Carroll was a stammerer rather than a stutterer, the often told story that Carroll referred to himself as Dodo since he sometimes stumbled over the first syllables of his name, Dodgson is untrue. I stand corrected.

But the most surprising and perhaps most controversial discovery that Woolf makes is her explanation of the break that occurred between Carroll and the Liddell family in the summer of 1863. There has been much speculation that Carroll might have appropriately or inappropriately made his feelings toward Alice known to members of the Liddell family. Karoline Leach has even argued in *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll* (1999) that Carroll might have been having an adulterous affair with Mrs. Liddell and was using his involvement with the children as a smokescreen, a suggestion that has been widely discredited. Looking at some of the letters that Florence Becker Lennon, the author of *Lewis Carroll* (1947), received from Lorina Liddell, Alice's older sister, Woolf teases out a new interpretation to this mystery that is almost as surprising as Leach's claim of Carroll's affair with Mrs. Liddell. In reading Lorina's letters, Woolf suggests that the older sister was attempting to influence and mislead Lennon into believing that Carroll had become too fond of Alice, but in reality the love interest was Lorina. Woolf notes that Lorina, or as she was known within her circle, Ina, was fourteen years old and physically mature for her age. Carroll at thirty-one was a good-looking young man

who looked younger than his age and was witty, clever, and attentive to all the Liddell children. Woolf maintains the break between the Liddell family was not due to Alice but rather to Ina. Woolf's surprise solution is that it was Ina who had "been too fond of *him*" (167) and that Ina had a schoolgirl crush on Carroll. Once Lorina's affections toward Carroll were discovered by her parents, this led to Carroll never being allowed to take Ina out again, even with a chaperone, and destruction of Carroll's letters to all the Liddell children.

Now that is radical interpretation of Carroll, and one that I suspect only a female critic could venture to make. It wasn't Carroll who was making overtures to Alice, but Alice's sister making advances on Carroll. It is a fascinating interpretation, but Woolf's evidence does not convince me that she has answered this mystery.

While Woolf provides a clear and compelling analysis that helps strip away many of the distortions, if not myths, that have come to be associated with Carroll—ranging from his alleged drug use, pedophilia, and stuttering—in the process she introduces a few new mysteries involving Lewis Carroll. Woolf finds Carroll was a man of contradictions who, as he aged, became increasingly more fussy and eccentric in his behavior. She argues that, as he matured, Carroll made fewer efforts to fit in with Oxford society and at times seemed to enjoy annoying and irritating others. He became a man more comfortable living in the world of his own making than within the conventions of his society, a gentle eccentric. While I think this is an accurate portrait of Carroll, this is no great mystery. This evaluation could be made of many other creative writers and artists. It is certainly true of Carroll's most famous creation, Alice, who announces in *Looking-Glass* that her favorite phrase is, "Let's pretend." (124).

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