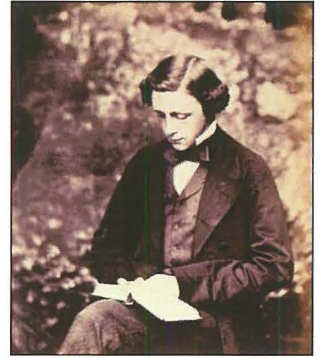


Alice for all...

by
Dane Garrod

The early story

Fantasy, memorable, thought provoking, and many other descriptions have been attributed to the story generally called *Alice in Wonderland*. 150 years since publication, it continues to charm younger readers who hear it for the first time, and also those who recall it from their lost childhood days. Like you and me, actually! It all began with a boat trip that started at Folly Bridge near the centre of Oxford, England, and finished five miles away at Godstow. Two Church of England Reverends rowed the boat taking the three daughters of the University Vice-Chancellor out for the afternoon. During the trip, believed to have been on Friday 4th July 1862, the Reverend Charles Dodgson told the girls a story he devised concerning a girl called Alice who was looking for an adventure. They loved it, especially 10 year old Alice Pleasance Liddell, who asked Dodgson to write it down for her. He began the very next day, although that earliest version no longer exists. During the next two years he undertook a great deal of research to add realism concerning the animals in the story, and in late November 1864 he gave Alice the handwritten manuscript of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*.

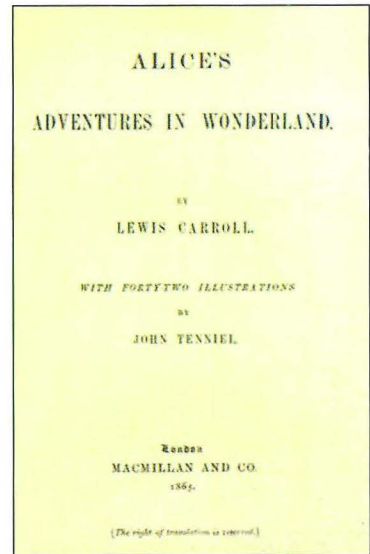


From small beginnings

By this time, 16 months after the initial manuscript was written, Dodgson had doubled the length of the story in preparation for publication. Comprising 12 separate chapters and 21 main characters, many being known and remembered by the readers through the years since – the Cheshire Cat, the White Rabbit, the



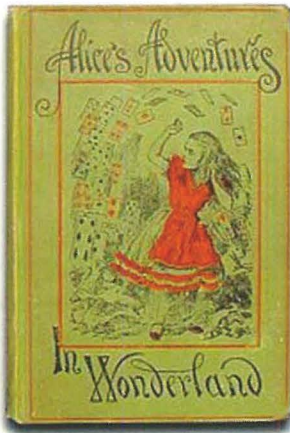
Dormouse, and of course, the Queen of Hearts. The manuscript was illustrated by the author himself, with 42 additional illustrations by John Tenniel, and a revised title of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The sequel in 1871 was *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. It has been published in a multitude of languages since that time, as well as used for card games, and a Wonderland Postage-Stamp Case. This was devised by Dodgson (known to us by his pen name of Lewis Carroll) and was one of the few Alice gifts he created. Housed in a leather case, the cardboard slip case had a printed picture of Alice with the baby on the outside and the Cheshire Cat on the reverse. Naturally, it was published in Oxford, the home of the author, Alice Liddell and her sisters.



How good is the story?

Perhaps that's for each reader to judge, but the immense number of printed copies and language translations that have occurred over the 150 years speaks volumes, literally. The story is a picaresque fantasy concerning a young girl with burning curiosity who follows a white rabbit with a pocket watch down a hole into an underground world. The story is characterised by sudden, dreamlike shifts of place and time and unexpected transformations, as well as a pervasive sense of inverted logic. Splendid satiric rhymes and word play abound. No synopsis of the

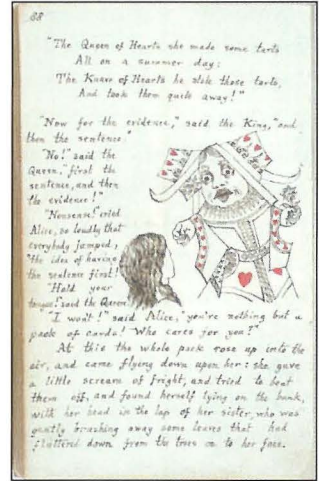
disjointed plot can capture the book's air of ingenious absurdity or the brilliance of its character sketches. The unreality of the tale only gives, perhaps surprisingly, a satisfying sense of familiarity. Have we not all had odd and absurd encounters with unusual people, or found ourselves in circumstances in which nothing seemed to go as planned?



The eccentric characters

In Wonderland under ground, Alice encounters many humourous and strange characters, most of them very opinionated. The White Rabbit sends her on an errand to his house, where she changes size, gets stuck inside, and scuffles with a lizard named Bill. A haughty

Caterpillar offhandedly teaches her how to control her dimensions by eating mushrooms. A main thread of the whole story is that Alice becomes entangled in a series of odd, comical situations in which she is generally more reasonable and sensible than everyone else – a clear heroine for all time. Later, she meets the sitters at the tea party – Mad Hatter, narcoleptic Dormouse and the March Hare. They talk at length, telling riddles, squabbling, and making very little sense. The story then proceeds to characters such as the Mock Turtle, and the frightening Queen of Hearts. So are children petrified by all of this? Not a bit of it, for they enjoy the absurdity as generally they have not gathered the checks and balances that come with experience and age.

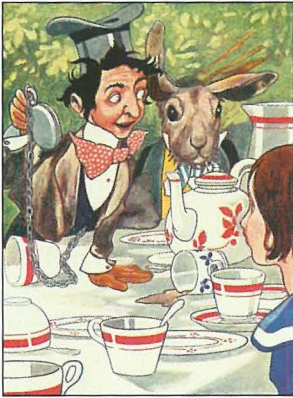


The magic of the story

Critics have pondered the book's magic and tried to explain it. What is it all about, they ask, and why is it so universally successful? What is the key to its enchantment, why is it so entertaining and yet so enigmatic? What charm enables it to transcend language as well as national and temporal differences and win its way into the hearts of young and old everywhere? We have to realise that Wonderland is a mysterious place where characters do not live by conventional rules and



that meaning does not play a conventional role. The laws of nature and of gravity, for example, do not work. The words have a role to play in themselves – *'We called him tortoise because he taught us'*. The child reader experiences a sense of satisfaction unparalleled elsewhere, and shares a private joke with the author. Although the characters take themselves seriously, no child reader is meant to. The White Rabbit, the Duchess, the Queen of Hearts, and the Mad Hatter are all figures of fun. These are the differences between this story and more conventional children's stories written in mid-Victorian Britain. Charles Dodgson's acceptance of the child as an equal, sharing jokes with them, and in so-doing giving them self-confidence, takes them another step forward towards adulthood.



What became of Alice's gift?

Regrettably, the author seems to have destroyed all of his notes and drafts for the book. However, the original longhand manuscript given to Alice Liddell by Charles Dodgson of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* has had a lively and interesting history. Before reaching its present home in the British Library in London, it had some adventures of its own. In 1926, Mrs Alice Hargreaves, the former Miss Liddell, sold it. By 1928 an American book dealer had purchased it at Sotheby's auction house for a then-record price of £15,400. Re-sold in 1946 for \$50,000, a group of Americans bought it in 1948, and the librarian of Congress brought it to England on the *RMS Queen Elizabeth* and presented it as a gift to the British people in appreciation for their gallantry in the Second World War. The real Alice died in 1934 as Mrs Reginald Hargreaves, and her ashes are buried at Lyndhurst, Hampshire, with a suitably inscribed gravestone in the churchyard there. As for Godstow, the destination of the rowing boat trip, nothing appears to have altered since that time long ago. The ruined abbey beside the river is unchanged – still a place of splendour and solitude.

The legacy

Numerous television and cinema films have been made since the first silent film about Alice in 1903. Recently, the theme has developed with a film about a grown-up Alice returning to the Wonderland. As for postage stamps, there's a treasure of characters and scenes to enlighten and charm us all. In 1979, the British Royal Mail's Year of the Child issue featured Alice on the 13p stamp, with her looking at the Mad Hatter with his 10/6 labelled top hat, and an ever grinning Cheshire Cat. Twenty years ago in 1994, a first class postage stamp showed Alice reading a manuscript. Now, in 2015, the British Royal Mail has embraced the story with some distinction by releasing an issue entirely devoted to this memorable work. Why now? Well, it's the 150th anniversary of the first publication, so what better time!