

Reply to Donald Rackin's review of *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*

A number of years ago, the noted Carrollian Donald Rackin wrote a scathing review of *In The Shadow Of The Dreamchild* IN VICTORIAN STUDIES,(VOL. 43 no. 4). The journal refused me the right to reply, so I did so on the web...

Mr Rackin's review is largely (I think he would agree), a sweeping and wholesale condemnation of my work in broad, non-specific strokes. *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild* is, he says, "difficult to take seriously". He adds that it is "feebly documented", "tendentious", unreliable and inaccurate. He claims that I 'misrepresent' my material both overtly and 'insidiously'.

This is fairly uncompromising. He does, however, offer one opening comment on which we can both agree:

If Leach's contentions were valid, our understanding of Dodgson, his particular upper-middle-class milieu, and even his literary and photographic achievements, would require substantial revision

I wholly accept this. *If* – and I stress the 'if' – I am correct in my contention that biography has seriously misrepresented the documentary reality of Charles Dodgson's life, and *if* those manifold inaccuracies and 'myths' (as I have termed them) can be proved to exist and to diverge markedly from the documentary reality, then indeed our understanding of Dodgson would require very 'substantial revision' indeed.

So, the vital question would seem to be – am I correct?

Mr Rackin would have his readers believe that the very idea is ridiculous. But in truth, all we need to do is review Carroll's biographical history, and we discover all the numerous errors and flights of fancy that combined to create the present image of Lewis Carroll. I have documented it carefully in the first chapter of the book Rackin is reviewing. A chapter in which I show:

1. That his first biographer, Collingwood, suppressed most of the evidence for Dodgson's relations with women, and indeed misrepresented some of these women as 'childfriends' of Carroll's.
2. That the idea that Dodgson lost interest in girls once they reached physical maturity was invented in 1932 by Langford Reed, whose 'biography' of Carroll is largely the product of his own imagination.
3. That the editor of the 1953 published edition of Dodgson's diaries never even saw the complete text of the document he was 'editing', and willingly collaborated with members of Dodgson's family to suppress or conceal material.

4. That the image of Alice Liddell as Dodgson's love-object was developed, in its modern form (though a few vague earlier rumours had existed), by Alex Taylor in 1952, possibly as a response to his publisher's demand to make his book (that was supposed to be about Carroll's mathematics) more popular and accessible. Since he wasn't allowed to see Dodgson's private diaries or letters, he based his conclusion on two poems Dodgson had written - neither of which was about Alice Liddell.

5. That, despite the certitude so frequently expressed by his biographers, there is very little *prima facie* hard data to support the idea that Dodgson was in love with Alice Liddell, or exclusively devoted to female children, or a shy recluse, or indeed almost any of the more extreme things frequently stated about him in print.

This and other evidence for the existence of the 'Carroll Myth' - the deceptive and simplified, if not largely fictitious rendering of Charles Dodgson's real life which is the central contention of my work - is simply *there* and cannot be refuted. Perhaps this is why Rackin doesn't even try to directly refute it? Why his review eschews specifics and particulars in favour of generalities and wholesale undocumented dismissal; and why it focuses on claiming or implying I have said things I have not said, rather than responding to anything I actually have.

For example, he claims in his second paragraph:

“For this very tendentious biography insists that virtually all the numerous biographical studies of Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) published since his death in 1898 have missed (or deliberately avoided) a crucial point: that this ostensibly celibate, conservative Christ Church don, generally considered an innocent - or, at least, sexually repressed - lover of little girls, probably had numerous grown-up lovers ("whether or not," as Leach says of one such supposed affair, "they ever engaged in the technicality of penetrative sex" [247]).

The quotation from my book that Mr Rackin lifts out concerns one actress friend of Dodgson's (Isa Bowman) and reads as so: (p. 247):

Her own feelings for him are suggested to be complex and intense, and considering his charisma, they may well have been so. ... When she was confirmed into the Anglican church, at the age of 16, and they could take Holy Communion together before his God, he told his private diary that he felt their intimacy had ascended to a new level... 'Now that he is dead...I can yet feel the old charm, I can still be glad that he has kissed me and that we were friends', she wrote. 'When the fire-glow...threw fantastic shadows about the quaint room ... and his eyes lighted on me ... I was conscious of a love and reverence for Charles Dodgson that became nearly adoration'. Whether or not they ever engaged in the technicality of penetrative sex, they were lovers, in every meaningful sense.

I think it is fairly clear when we read the original full text that my point is the very opposite of the one Mr Rackin credits me with making. I do *not* assert that these two were physical lovers. I assert that they were 'lovers' in the spiritual sense of closeness and intimacy 'whether or not they ever engaged in the technicality of penetrative sex'. Thus, Mr Rackin is entirely misrepresenting the nature of my work to his readers.

Something Mr Rackin does not appear to consider is that his incredulous scoffing at the mere idea that Dodgson even might have experienced adult intimacy of a sexual nature - and his invocation of Dodgson as a 'repressed' lover of little girls, is based on exactly the mythic falsehood that I am trying to address. Yes, it has been 'generally considered' that Dodgson was purely a 'lover of little girls' - but the documentation shows this belief is false, or at least heavily simplified. Dodgson in fact enjoyed as much closeness with women as with girls, and our understanding of his nature needs to readjust to encompass this quite major alteration - which inevitably includes the bare possibility that he wanted, sought, or even achieved, sexual intimacy with an adult female at some time in his life.

In the same misquoting, mis-attributing vein, Mr Rackin observes:

[all previous biographies have been] grounded in the conviction that Carroll's frequently manifested love of what he called his "child- friends" (including Alice Liddell) was authentic, and not - as Leach would have it - often merely a guise of the chaste "patron saint of children" hoping to get at their mothers or older sisters (162).

In saying this he is refuting a claim I have never made. I do not - anywhere - assert that Dodgson's love of children was 'merely a guise' used to 'get at their mothers or older sisters', nor would I ever make such a claim or allow it to be made on my behalf. On the contrary my book, (the very one which Mr Rackin is reviewing), devotes considerable space to saying that his worship of 'the child' was an essential aspect of Dodgson's nature as a man and as an artist.

On page 71, for example, I say:

For Dodgson the girl-child was a central expression and emotional focus in his life, but not in any of the ways the current biography believes. She was not a sexual fetish, or an avoidance of unwelcome adulthood...her pivotal role in his life was as the cleanser of his grubby soul.

The thing that Rackin appears to find so objectionable, beneath the pretended claim cited above, is that I point out the fact that Dodgson's child-worship was more complex than the myth has ever allowed; that it involved measures of self-conscious 'pursuit of innocence' as well as a measure of irony (he often identified his adult woman-friends as 'children' in a very knowing and challenging way). This appears to be what is distressing Rackin, though, as he can't directly refute it (it's simply too obviously true) he chooses to pretend I am saying something else, and refutes that instead.

And again:

Leach endlessly reiterates her sweeping contention that the "hundred years of biography surrounding the author of Alice [...] has been devoted primarily to a potent mythology" (9), casting Dodgson as either "the world's favorite saint" or "the world's favorite pedophile" (258). "The evidence for this [mythologizing] is everywhere," Leach declares (9). The only way, perhaps, to excuse such irresponsible exaggerations is to consider them as rhetorical flourishes...

This seems mainly designed to give the impression to those who read the review but who have not read my book, that I don't offer any evidence. But in truth, the opening chapter of my book extensively reviews most of the biographies he cites as reliable sources, and shows how they are replete with myths and errors. So, when he writes about 'rhetorical flourishes' and implies I offer no evidence he is effectively ignoring about a third of the printed matter he is notionally reviewing. Ironically his claim of 'rhetorical flourishes', is itself a - rhetorical flourish, and a completely false and misleading one.

It seems evident that Rackin has decided my work is fit only for dismissal, and thinks nothing of distorting the facts in order to allow him more freely to disparage it. Yet suddenly, in the midst of this orgy of denigration, he does something of a flip and claims:

But Leach's book is not totally without merit. Despite its excesses, it helps (like a number of recent biographies) to dispel the stubborn popular misconceptions of Carroll as an unworldly, childlike, asexual genius, misconceptions that persist despite all the hard evidence to the contrary. Moreover, Leach makes several worthwhile contributions to the ongoing reassessment of the relations between Dodgson and his father, an important topic in any Carroll biography.

I am of course pleased he approves of what I am doing - but puzzled. He began by deriding the mere idea of the mythic 'Carroll' - but now adds almost as an afterthought that yes, actually there are 'stubborn popular misconceptions' that need to be corrected. But he seems unaware that these very 'stubborn preconceptions' were born in the biographies he is so staunchly defending. His sudden volte-face leaves one wondering why exactly he thinks my work 'difficult to take seriously'?

Even more confusingly, the weather-vane almost immediately swoops again, and points itself back in its original direction for his final summation:

For those readers who can, like Carroll's *White Queen*, believe six impossible things before breakfast, Leach's interpretations will not seem so fantastical-or dangerous. But the danger is there nevertheless: readers unfamiliar with the great wealth of Carroll's private letters and diaries and with the exacting modern scholarship devoted to them might very well view this book as a trustworthy account.

The last sentence is interesting. He tells us there is a 'mountain' of evidence which shows I am wrong, but doesn't quote any of it, or source it, or tell us where it can be found. He simply refers to it as an offstage presence a 'great wealth' of private letters and diaries and 'exacting modern scholarship' and uses it to warn people away from my work. 'She might seem trustworthy, but she isn't - she's dangerous, and there's a great wealth of evidence and a mountain of scholarship to prove it - *trust me*'.

Well, I think it's reasonable to say that I *will* believe this mountain of evidence and 'exacting modern scholarship' exists, *if* he can show it to us; produce it, quote it, source it, to show it exists as anything other than imagination. If he can then he has made a point and I will concede it absolutely, and admit that yes - I am a dangerous woman. Until then, I fear he is simply making a claim without substance, and (to quote an eminent scholar) - "The only way, perhaps, to excuse such irresponsible exaggerations is to consider them as rhetorical flourishes..."

What's regrettable here is that Rackin is supposed to be writing a review - an objective analysis of my book *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*, but what he actually offers is an attempted rebuttal. Instead of reviewing my work dispassionately and fairly, he misrepresents, misquotes and generalises for the single purpose of discrediting it. This is unfair to both my work, and to his readers, who will be left with a quite untrue and distorted impression, both of my work, and of Rackin's intentions.

Let's conclude by returning to Rackin's pivotal point:

If Leach's contentions were valid, our understanding of Dodgson, his particular upper-middle-class milieu, and even his literary and photographic achievements, would require substantial revision.

Perhaps, if he reconsiders the evidence in the case he will come to the conclusion – as many are now doing – that there *is* a serious and puzzling problem with Carroll's biography; that the mountains of evidence that ought to be there to support the conclusions it employs, simply are not to be found, and that a revision, of precisely the type he says I am invoking, is indeed urgently necessary if we are to be fair to the memory and genius of Lewis Carroll.

Karoline Leach