

GYLES BRANDRETH

– Introduction –

Lewis Carroll was extraordinary. Writer, teacher, mathematician, clergyman, photographer, puzzler, poet, he was born on 27 January 1832 and died on 14 January 1898. During his sixty-six years, he did something that very few others have achieved in the entire history of humanity: he created an imaginary world and a raft of characters that became instantly famous across the globe. They are famous still, and, I reckon, will be for the rest of time. Lewis Carroll was a brilliant and complicated human being: tall, slim, awkward, amusing, shy, he had a unique way with words yet suffered from a life-long stammer. He was also an insomniac. This little book (conceived and compiled by me in the 1970s though entirely written by him in Victorian times) will show you how ingeniously this extraordinary man dealt with his sleepless nights.

Lewis Carroll has long been a hero of mine. I fell in love with the heroine of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when I was a little boy living in London in the 1950s and was taken to a stage adaptation of *Through the Looking-Glass* starring a young Juliet Mills as Alice. I became fascinated by him in my early twenties

when the veteran British entertainer Cyril Fletcher asked me to create a one-man show based on the life and work of Lewis Carroll. That's when I learnt about his insomnia. In the first act of my one-man play, the great man was in his Oxford college rooms talking to himself as he tried (and failed) to get to sleep. In the second act, he was in bed having dreams (and nightmares) peopled by the characters he had created, from the Mad Hatter to the Frumious Bandersnatch. In the 1980s I devised an *Alice in Wonderland* board game that was produced by Spears Games, the manufacturers of Scrabble – a word-building game very like one Lewis Carroll had devised more than a century before.

In 2010, with the composer Susannah Pearce, I wrote a musical play called *The Last Photograph*, which explored both the mystery of why Lewis Carroll (one of the great photographers of his time) suddenly decided to give up taking pictures and the nature of his relationship with the young actress, Isa Bowman, who famously played Alice on stage and, less conspicuously, holidayed with Carroll in Eastbourne when she was in her late teens and he was in his late forties. It's an intriguing story. He was a most intriguing man.

Lewis Carroll wasn't his real name, of course. He was a clergyman's son, born at All Saints' Vicarage in Daresbury in Cheshire in the north of England, and christened Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the oldest boy and the third oldest of his parents' eleven children. Most of his male forebears were either army officers

or Anglican clergymen. His great-grandfather, another Charles Dodgson, had been Bishop of Elphin in Ireland. His paternal grandfather, again a Charles, had been an army captain, killed in action in Ireland in 1803, when his two sons were still boys. The older of these two, yet another Charles, was Lewis Carroll's father. A brilliant mathematician (he got a double first at Christ Church College, Oxford), he decided against an academic career, married his first cousin, Frances Jane Lutwidge, in 1830, and became a country parson.

When our Charles Dodgson – the Lewis Carroll to be – was eleven, his father was offered the living of Croft-on-Tees and the family moved to Yorkshire where they stayed for the next twenty-five years. Dodgson Senior became the Archdeacon of Richmond and young Charles was sent to Richmond Grammar School, aged twelve, and then to Rugby School, aged fourteen. He was not happy at Rugby. 'I cannot say,' he later wrote, 'that any earthly considerations would induce me to go through my three years again . . . I can honestly say that if I could have been . . . secure from annoyance at night, the hardships of the daily life would have been comparative trifles to bear.' He was not bullied himself, but the younger boys were. According to his first biographer, his nephew, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, 'even though it is hard for those who have only known him as the gentle and retiring don to believe it, it is nevertheless true that long after he left school, his name was remembered as that

of a boy who knew well how to use his fists in defence of a righteous cause.'

He stood up for the younger boys – and he was clever. 'I have not had a more promising boy at his age since I came to Rugby,' reported his mathematics master, R. B. Mayor. He left Rugby at the end of 1849 and went to Christ Church College, Oxford, where he stayed for the rest of his life.

At Oxford, like his father, Charles Dodgson secured a double-first. In 1855 he won the Christ Church Mathematical Lectureship and he later became a Student (or Fellow) of the college. In 1861 he was ordained a deacon in the Church of England, though he was always more a teacher than a preacher. In *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*, Stuart Collingwood wrote, 'his Diary is full of such modest depreciations of himself and his work, interspersed with earnest prayers (too sacred and private to be reproduced here) that God would forgive him the past, and help him to perform His holy will in the future.'

The Reverend Charles Dodgson was clearly a bit of an oddity. He had a slightly ungainly gait because of a knee injury and as a boy he had had a fever that left him hard of hearing in one ear. At seventeen he had severe whooping cough which left him with a chronically weak chest. His stammer – which he called his 'hesitation' – was a nuisance, but not wholly debilitating. He was ready to take part in parlour entertainments, playing charades, singing songs, reciting verse.