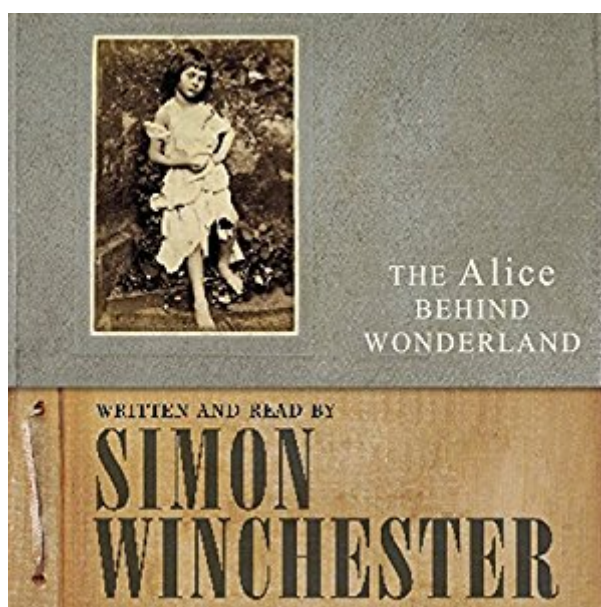


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# Alice Behind Wonderland



## Synopsis

On a summer's day in 1858, in a garden behind Christ Church College in Oxford, Charles Dodgson, a lecturer in mathematics, photographed six-year-old Alice Liddell, the daughter of the college dean, with a Thomas Ottewill Registered Double Folding camera, recently purchased in London. Simon Winchester deftly uses the resulting image - as unsettling as it is famous, and the subject of bottomless speculation - as the vehicle for a brief excursion behind the lens, a focal point on the origins of a classic work of English literature. Dodgson's love of photography framed his view of the world, and was partly responsible for transforming a shy and half-deaf mathematician into one of the world's best-loved observers of childhood. Little wonder that there is more to "Alice Liddell as the Beggar Maid" than meets the eye. Using Dodgson's published writings, private diaries, and of course his photographic portraits, Winchester gently exposes the development of Lewis Carroll and the making of his Alice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The first thing to note about this book is that the title is misleading. You might imagine that it is primarily about the original Alice. In fact, there is far more about the history of photography, and about the Carroll collector M. L. Parrish, than about Alice. That in itself is not a serious fault. Far more serious are the very many errors of fact. I list just a few; there are plenty more. He did not live in Tom Quad in 1856; he moved there in 1868 (p.11). His parents were first cousins, not third cousins (p.12). His back-garden railway was at Croft, not Daresbury (pp.12-13). Not all of his

home-made magazines survive (p.18). Charles arrived at Oxford 30, not 40, years after his father graduated (p.19). Henrietta was seven, not four, when Carroll's mother died (p.20). He refers to "a magazine that for some inexplicable reason was called the Train" (p.27); the reasons for its name are well-known. Similarly, it is well known why Dodgson suggested the name Edgar Cuthwellis (p.29) - it is an anagram of his first two names, Charles Lutwidge. Maybe these errors are minor, but they could all have been avoided by reading the books that the author himself recommends for further reading. It does mean that it is difficult to trust any statement in the book without checking it. The climax of the book describes Carroll taking the cover photo, of Alice as a beggar. "Is Mrs. Liddell watching? Is Lorina in the garden? And Edith? ... Would anyone care that Dodgson then reached behind the little girl's hair and adjusted the off-white garment about her shoulders, such that it fell slightly from her left and exposed only just entirely her left nipple?" (p.

I really enjoyed this book. If you are interested in the subject matter, I think you will like it, too. At 128 pages it is a little slim: take that into account. I particularly enjoyed Winchester's evocative descriptions of what it really meant to be a photographer using the wet collodion process, and he helped me to understand that Dodgson was no casual amateur, but was actually a moderately important photographer of the era. I can't bear to give this less than four stars, so I won't, but really, the fact that it includes no photographs is an intolerable deficiency. It really needs to have twenty or thirty reproductions--and because these are works of photographic art, and because one of the reasons Dodgson used the collodion process was to capture detail, they need to be good, high-resolution reproductions. We also could use a nice photograph of an Ottewill Double Folding Camera--preferably one in the process of being unfolded "Till it looked all squares and oblongs/Like a complicated figure/In the Second Book of Euclid." The very least the publisher or author could have done would be to provide a link to a website with good reproductions of the pictures. The reason this is more than a "nice-to-have" is that a lot of the content of the book is really about Dodgson's photography. To give just one example, Winchester speaks of "the earliest photographic glimpse we have of Dodgson." He describes a photograph in great detail. I tried to find this photograph on the Web and I found one matching his description in every respect but one.

The book is packed with mistakes. It can't go well for a book when the author doesn't even know how to pronounce the last names of his two main subjects. "Liddell" (Alice's last name) rhymes with "riddle," and is not pronounced with an accent on the last syllable. Carroll puns on the name sounding like "little" in at least two places in Wonderland. Winchester pronounces the name wrong

in the video on this site, and, if I hear correctly, he pronounces Dodgson (Carroll's real last name) wrong as well. Carroll did not pronounce the g; it was pronounced "DODson." He states that Princeton owns the only two copies of the photograph. This is not true. He is misinterpreting Edward Wakeling's recreation of Carroll's photographic Register, a list of all of Carroll's photographs. Wakeling says he is only listing one location even if there are more locations for a photograph. Winchester has Carroll living in his final rooms at Christ Church throughout his entire life at Oxford. Carroll moved around several times and was not in his famous rooms even when he wrote Wonderland, well after he took the photograph of Alice as the Beggar Maid. Winchester doesn't realize that two pennames that Carroll submitted to an editor are anagrams of "Charles Lutwidge" (Lutwidge was his middle name and mother's last name). Winchester writes that the photographic plate must be prepared in "pitch dark" but later in the book writes in "near-total darkness." I believe the latter is correct. Winchester does not understand how a view camera works. He writes that the whole of the camera needs to be brought into the darkroom for the plate to be inserted. But he writes that there is an "ingenious flap" and so only the negative frame need be brought back in the darkroom for development.

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