Arts & Humanities

Alice in Columbialand

Celebrating the legacy of the "real" Alice in Wonderland.

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|
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Dear Dr. Murray Butler, Alice typed*. Thank you very much for your most kind letter. I am looking forward with great pleasure to my visit to New York in May.*

Alice paused to think of it: New York! The idea of all those tall buildings pleased her very much. Like so many giant chessmen. She resumed typing.

I am extremely honoured by your intimation, which I shall of course treat as confidential —

“Oh,” Alice thought, “*intimation* does sound a good deal like *invitation*, but it has a different meaning entirely. *Two* meanings: a suggestion, and a formal announcement. Though,” she considered, “it *is* an invitation, too, after all.”

She mailed her response to Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, with a promise to keep the true purpose of her visit a secret.

A short time later, it was announced that Alice would be coming to Columbia, to join in a literary celebration marking the centenary of the birth of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll.

That’s when a queer thing began to happen. Bundles upon bundles of letters began to arrive at Cuffnells, the tree-filled estate where Alice had lived for more than 50 years. The letters were from children all over America, begging Alice to sign their books.

“That would be impossible, of course,” thought Alice, who had lived quietly and privately for a very long time, and wasn’t used to such attention. “Why, if I’m 79 years old,” which she was, “and there are 100,000 autographs to sign, and each signature takes 10 seconds, more or less —” No, it was quite impossible. As she couldn’t oblige everyone, Alice hoped her young admirers would listen to her on the radio during the festivities in New York so that she could greet them. She didn’t want them to think her rude.

Her thoughts then turned to her own book, the one that Mr. Dodgson had made especially for her, and that bore her name, and contained Dodgson’s own drawings; the book that, after the death of her husband six years earlier, she had been induced to sell at auction. Oh, people did make a fuss, protesting that so important a relic of English literature should be required to stay in England. But Alice had stood her ground. The book was purchased by a Mr. Rosenbach of Philadelphia for $75,000 — the most money ever paid for an English manuscript.

On April 29, 1932, Alice sailed to New York with her son Caryl (her two other sons had died in the Great War) and her sister Rhoda, aboard the *Berengaria*. As the steamer crossed the Atlantic, Alice, between naps and card games, reflected on those lovely lines of Murray Butler’s that still stirred her heart: *It gives me great pleasure to advise you, in entire confidence, that the Trustees of Columbia University have voted to confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Letters*, honoris causa, *in recognition of the place which your name occupies in English literature and*

of the remarkable contributions to that literature by Lewis Carroll to which your personality gave rise.

Alice had kept the confidence, and now that she was entering the New York harbor, with the marvelous skyline gleaming in the afternoon sun, she felt the pangs of her natural shyness. Not that appearing at Columbia was *too* out of the ordinary; when you are the daughter of Henry Liddell, the famous Greek scholar and dean of Christ Church, Oxford, you are accustomed to academic settings. But an *honoris causa*! That was something else entirely. In Alice's day, English women weren't permitted to take a degree — why, Oxford didn't begin granting degrees to women until 1920. Columbia's gesture moved her greatly.

Of course, she would never presume to take any credit for Mr. Dodgson's books. But she had to admit (with some embarrassment, for she was a modest person) that if it were not for her having made a perfect nuisance of herself by pestering poor Mr. Dodgson to write his story down, instead of simply speaking it, there wouldn't *be* any Alice or White Rabbit or Mad Hatter or Cheshire Cat or any Wonderland at all!

As the ship hove into port, Alice, ever the Victorian lady, took tea on the sundeck. She wore a black fur coat over a silk gown with blue polka dots, a black hat with a feather, and a bunch of orchids fastened to her lapel. A swarm of reporters and press photographers appeared (Alice hadn't had her picture snapped so earnestly since she was a young girl, posing for Mr. Dodgson), as well as two gentlemen from the University: J. Enrique Zanetti, a chemistry professor and chairman of the Lewis Carroll Centennial Committee, and Roger Howson, the University librarian.

With the aid of two walking sticks, Alice disembarked, and was driven to her lodgings at the Waldorf-Astoria, where she had the rather Wonderlandish experience of rising in an elevator to the 39th floor. ("When I was young," she told her son afterward, "I had to grow my neck long in order to get up to these heights. I think this is a much easier way.")

On Wednesday, May 4, Alice arrived at Morningside Heights. In the Low Rotunda, which was still a reading room, a throne had been erected so that "Queen" Alice, she of *Through the Looking Glass*, could have her photo taken with Dr. Murray Butler, though somehow when the flashbulbs went off it was Butler who was ensconced in the chair. The tribute continued inside the University gymnasium,

where some 2000 people were assembled, including the British Consul General. A large decorative panel had been constructed, featuring a menagerie of Carrollian characters, with Alice in the middle, holding a flamingo. The all-women glee clubs of Hunter College and Barnard College, accompanied by the 70-piece Columbia Orchestra, performed selections from the suite *Alice in Wonderland* by Edgar Stillman Kelley, under the baton of Lowell Beveridge of the music department. The English professor Harry Morgan Ayres stood to praise Alice for "awaking with her girlhood's charm the ingenious fancy of a mathematician familiar with imaginary quantities, stirring him to reveal his complete understanding of the heart of a child as well as the mind of man." He concluded his kind remarks with the words, "you as the moving cause of this truly noteworthy contribution to English literature, I gladly admit to the degree of Doctor of Letters in this University."

To Alice, it was a most wondrous and meaningful birthday. She was 80 years old.

Alice Pleasance Hargreaves (née Liddell) '32HON died two years later, but the celebration of her legacy has never ended. This summer, her great-great-niece, Cathy Rubin, a children's book author, could be found on the sixth floor of Butler Library, researching material in the University Archive for a documentary titled *The Real Alice in Wonderland*. The film will examine, among other aspects of Alice's curious life, her dramatic coming-out party at Columbia. Rubin is hoping to release the picture in early 2010, to coincide with Tim Burton's much-awaited *Alice in Wonderland*, starring Johnny Depp and Anne Hathaway.

Soman Chainani '08SOA is a consultant on Rubin's project. "I've always been a huge *Alice in Wonderland* fan," says Chainani, who was a recipient of the MFA Film Program's top prize, the FMI Fellowship for writing and directing. "I've seen every film version, and am very steeped in the whole Lewis Carroll legend. I love stories that begin in the real world and then have doors that open into a fantasyland." As for Alice herself, Chainani is excited to help bring her story to a new generation — and to highlight her Columbia connection.

As Rubin likes to say: "Oxford created her; Columbia made her famous."

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