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Fairy Pictures: The Elusive Images of Lewis Carroll

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Abstract: This paper re-examines how readings of Lewis Carroll's photography have been colored throughout their history by Carroll's shifting reputation. As Carroll has been alternately assigned the role of pedophile or the man misunderstood by time, his photography has been either denounced as deeply perverse or excused as innocently fitting within contemporary artistic trends. His character has been conflated to legend and relegated to the realm of the fairy tale, and his photography made to follow – all while remaining fixed upon the page. So what truth is revealed in a photograph, and how may it be read? Are the implications of a photograph as obvious as its physical content, or can a photograph more intuitively address the psychological and emotional? Although photography literally means 'the writing of light,' the reading of a photograph often drifts into the realm of nonsense. This article compares the subtleties of visual literacy with the processes of traditional literary analysis, examining both Carroll's extensive photographic portfolio and the critical readings it has received. Comparing Lewis Carroll's 'fairy tale' photography to the belief inspired by the Cottingley fairy photographs, this article explores photography's place in the confluence of art and life, fantasy and reality.

Keywords: Carroll, Victorian, photography, nonsense, phenomenology, Cottingley

Catching Fairies

'In the old times, when wishing was still effective,' (or so old German folktales began), cousins Elise Wright and Frances Griffiths of Cottingley, England, desired nothing more than to share their world with fairies. Sixteen and nine years old respectively in the summer of 1917, they drew fairies often, spoke of them constantly, and would often go down to the beck at the bottom of their garden to play and call to them. One day, after an accidental slip into the river, a soaking Frances pleaded with her furious mother not to forbid her from going down to the stream, sobbing that that was where the fairies lived. When this pronouncement awarded her banishment to her bedroom for telling lies, the girls concocted a plan to convince their parents of the truth of their stories, and to prove to them once and for all the existence of fairies. Desiring to capture the magical realm in which they imagined their days, the cousins asked to borrow the family camera after their punishment had been lifted, and disappeared with it to the beck. Returning to the house triumphant, they developed the film that night – and there were fairies on the negatives.



But can photography really get caught up in such a fantastic flight of fancy? The Cottingley fairy photographs touched off a media frenzy and nearly seventy years of debate over their authenticity, but only continued a conversation about the nature of truth in photography which had begun at the invention of the medium. As photographer Jerry L. Thompson has noted, photography's objective description is intertwined so completely with 'a penchant for subjective understanding' that it is often difficult to untangle which is which. Critical interpretations of photography, like the Cottingley cousins, seem often to discover the truth they set out to find.¹

This same trial of fact can be seen clearly in the history of critical interpretations of Lewis Carroll's photographs – for Lewis Carroll, the author of such whimsical and timeless childhood takes such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), was also the Reverend Charles Dodgson, the slightly eccentric Oxford don who took photographs of naked children. Having charmed his way into the nursery with whimsy and guile, it seems imperative that the plain and unembellished reality behind Lewis Carroll be unadorned and immediately put forward so that his tales may be fairly and properly evaluated. In light of such an accusation, it seemingly becomes necessary lay clear the unseen elements of this complex man's double life, juxtaposing public and private, art and life, fantasy and reality in order to determine how to best interpret his character. Lewis Carroll and his real-life counter, Charles Dodgson, must be brought into the same room and questioned, and the truth of his intentions understood.

But for more than a century, the figure of Lewis Carroll has been alternately assigned the role of pedophile or the innocent man misunderstood by time, his eccentricities exaggerated or his deviances downplayed. His celebrity, like all celebrity, has not only subjected his character to the scrutiny of the public eye, but to the conferral of an identity projected onto him. His character has been conflated to legend and relegated to the realm of the fairy tale, and his photography made to follow – all while remaining fixed upon the page. The same details of his habits and opinions have simultaneously proven his role as a manipulative voyeur for some, while cementing for others a belief in his childlike innocence and unimpeachable naïveté, leaving readers to ask – as Alice herself asks as she is returned to the real world from her reverie – 'Who dreamed it?'

Dodgson's photography often gravitates toward the heart of his biographies, and is scrutinized as the suggested symptoms of a postmortem diagnosis. For, far more explicit than any verbal or written account could ever aspire to be, the scenes a photograph conveys cannot be dismissed by doubt or speculation; they present

¹ Thompson, Jerry L. *Truth and Photography: Notes on Looking and Photographing*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), p. 10.



admissible evidence, and inarguable testimony of events which have passed. After all, as an indexical record of light, a photograph is a physically real document plucked from the world, and always carries with it a truthful connection to its referent. Even etymologically equating to 'the writing of light,' the impulse to compare the medium's seemingly natural affinity for truth with traditional modes of description pervaded early analyses of photography. Inventor William Henry Fox Talbot nicknamed photography 'The Pencil of Nature' for its apparent ability represent an objective rendering and laying forward of truth, free from the subjectivity of language or emotion, and photographer Henry Peach Robinson praised photography for its reportage of 'perfect truth,' and its 'absolute rendering of light and shade and form.'²

But frustrating what would seem to be an open-and-shut case, the trial of Dodgson's character is consistently stalled and forced toward an inconclusive verdict. Beyond the difficulties of making sense of an undoubtedly multifaceted and complicated personality, Dodgson's seemingly devious proclivities are potentially afforded an alibi by a tradition of art which sometimes makes allowances for such images. Those who wish to preserve the nostalgic sanctity of his childhood lands, (such as Karoline Leech and her 1999 biography *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild*, which spends a lot of energy debunking many of the common narratives of Lewis Carroll's character) contend that a particular frame of assumptions is necessary to understand his character, and allow artistic merit and historical context to justify his craft. They argue that though the precision and the mechanics of the photographic process would seem to produce perfect quotations of reality, photographs are references no less dependent upon context than words; their relationship between signifier and signified unable to be assumed.

The Writing of Light

So exactly how far does the truth of a photograph extend? If Dodgson's defense rests upon historical circumstance, for example, perhaps it is not unreasonable to argue in favor of his innocence that the sanctification of the child can be seen expressed as a fashionable trend of belief in the Victorian era. Working to create images of beauty, photographers such as Oscar Rejlander, Lady Hawarden, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Henry Peach Robinson were among the first pioneers of child portraiture photography, and often emphasized the cherubic nature of childhood through tasteful nudity, and occasionally even to surpass reality and imagine children as fairies and nymphs. Indeed, an entire narrative of childhood was literally and consciously mythologized during this time, and its assumptions propagated by literature and art.

² Henderson, Andrea. "Magic Mirrors: Formalist Realism in Victorian Physics and Photography." *Representations* Winter 117.1 (2012): 120-50. *JSTOR*. University of California Press. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2012.117.1.120>> [accessed 27 Dec. 2013].



Developing upon the ideal that a child's innocence had the power to inspire and facilitate a glorification of the spirit, portraits were commonly sought for young children in which they were adorned with props of wings and halos, and posed to insist upon their innocence and spiritual association as creatures wholly separate from the adult world. Through their staging and deliberate framing, these photographs had the power not only to safely posit and preserve their vision of a transient period of childhood, but were able by their very existence to lend legitimacy to their own alternative reality. The transformation of the role of the child in common imagination can be traced through the tradition of Enlightenment thinkers like Locke and Rousseau, who regarded the child as entering the world without preconceptions, and as a station in life distinct from the station and obligations of adulthood. Rousseau, in his influential work on education, *Emile, or On Education*, offers a counter to the view of children as benefiting from the same treatment as adults: 'You are worried about seeing him spend his early years in doing nothing. What! Is it nothing to be happy? Nothing to jump, play, and run all day? He will never be so busy in his life.' He posits childhood as 'reason's sleep' and as a necessary balance to the rigor of adult life.³ The Romantic poetry of Blake and Wordsworth often glorified childhood as an enchanted and fleeting time. Blake's poetry often equates the purer aspects of childhood to divinity, such as in 'The Lamb' in *Song of Innocence and Experience* (1794) ('I a child and thou a lamb/ We are called by His name.')

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The Victorian 'Cult of the Child,' as English novelist Ernest Dowson termed the idealizing trend in an 1889 article, further sanctified childhood, regarding the child not only as absolutely innocent, but entirely devoid of sexuality.⁵ Children were linked more purely to the order of the universe than the overly cognizant manner of adults, and were regarded as beings for whom the complexities of adulthood do not exist. Some, such as Jonathan Hansen, have looked at the historical context surrounding Lewis Carroll's photographs and noted the changing views of childhood which were emerging during this time, especially the manner in which childhood was beginning to be recognized and elongated by the implementation of various educational and labor reform bills; a space consciously purified and protected, free of much of the complications imposed on it today.⁶

Indeed, apparently reflecting this more trusting cultural climate, the earliest tellers of Carroll's tale tended to be more forgiving in their appraisals, regarding Carroll as they supposed Carroll regarded children: free of complication. As

³ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile: Or, On Education*. (New York: Basic, 1979), p. 107.

⁴ Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. (New York: Chartwell), 2009, p. 8

⁵ Ernest Dowson, "The Cult of the Child," in *The Critic*, August 17th 1889, reprinted in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, op. cit., pp. 433-35.

⁶ Hansen, Jonathan. "Reconstructing Lewis Carroll's Looking Glass" *The Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20 (2001): pp. 1-18.

biographer and defender Florence Becker Lennon wrote in 1945, 'He was the last saint of this irreverent world; those who have surrendered the myths of Santa Claus [...] of Jehovah, hang their last remnants of mysticism on Lewis Carroll and will not allow themselves to examine him dispassionately.'⁷ Even Virginia Woolf insists in a 1939 essay that Lewis Carroll was a grown man who, though perhaps repressed or starved of nourishment, purely and innocently 'slipped through the grown-up world like a shadow, solidifying only on the beach at Eastbourne, with little girls whose frocks he pinned up with safety pins.'⁸ Dodgson's photography was therefore seen not as sexualizing his subjects, but as proof of his preoccupation with realizing a spiritual ideal.

Framed as One

Even today, perhaps, while it isn't common practice to photograph children as nude cherubs, this general photographic impulse toward perfection in art is not entirely unfathomable. Photographs in general are often noted and called upon for their power to create, preserve, and beautify memories – as anyone who has ever interrupted an activity to stage a happy moment through a token photograph can attest. Photographs, concerned with preserving that which is vulnerable to change and dissipation, seem especially important when discussing the rapidly fleeting phase of childhood, and the representation of children in Victorian portraiture were particularly staged to act as idealized iconography. As Carol Mavor writes, 'Photography was invented hand-in-hand with our modern conception of childhood. The child and the photograph were commodified, fetishized, developed alongside each other: they were laminated and framed as one.'⁹

Photographs, apparently offering stability and objectivity, often prove to be as unstable and subjective as the world around them. Their analyses prove subject to the influence and inclinations of societal conventions and acceptable expressions of desire, which commonly fluctuate from generation to generation, charging static and unchanging images with the potential for misapprehension. In much the same way that child nudity was often accepted in the Victorian era, for example, post-mortems were especially valued in an age of high infant and childhood mortality rates, and deathbeds became a popular early subject for photography. Deceased infants were photographed alone or with their parents or siblings, posed as though they were living. These practices, though widely considered shocking and even disrespectful today, weren't seen as morbid or strange at the time of their making.

⁷ Woolf, Virginia, and Leonard Woolf. *The Moment, and Other Essays*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), p. 82.

⁸ Woolf, Virginia, and Leonard Woolf, p. 90.

⁹ Mavor, Carol. *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 3.



Might Dodgson simply be understood as having owned the aesthetics of his time and nothing more, or do his images speak to a different kind of desire, and hold within their frames latent but incontrovertible transgressions, rendered manifest by the passage of time? Apologists claim the Victorian view of children to be fundamentally different to modern perceptions and uphold Dodgson's character as immaculate, but though general assumptions about the supreme innocence of childhood transcend a single period of time or subset of society, proposing a romanticized point of origin and confidence in moments of doubt and difficulty, perhaps it is this same nostalgic impulse which convinces some modern Carroll biographers to argue that the entire dynamic of an adult's relationship to children was regarded differently in this pre-Freudian society – flattening the past as completely as a photograph.

In her 1999 biography, Karoline Leech often speaks in grand generalizations when summarizing the attitudes of the Victorian era in her biography, painting and systematically reinforcing a backdrop of appropriate historical context for Dodgson's portraits. But it would be naïve to suggest that views of the child have ever been uniform. It cannot reasonably be said that images of nude children were ever universally viewed as sexless or accepted through some sort of natural law as universally unquestionable in any time period so as to render modern criticism anachronistic.

Perhaps because Lewis Carroll and the stories he created are so intimately tied up with an idealistic image of childhood, perfecting his character becomes an important aspect of protecting the innocence of childhood and the magic of his lands. Analyses of his life and work attempt to discover the ideal rather than the literal; readings amend and perfect reality, fusing sight with desire. In this vein, an entire myth of 'Lewis Carroll' sprung up around his life, and has been continually reworked and perfected since its birth – and at times violently bent to reflect a desired image. Indeed, the problematic character of Lewis Carroll is one which, in popular remembrance, now belongs almost as much to the genre of fairy tale as the stories he is best remembered for.

To return to a more fantastic challenge of narrative: The case of the Cottingley fairy photographs can perhaps be taken as one of the best-remembered and most-debated controversies of belief in the history of photography. Despite their seemingly impossible suggestion, the reception of these photographs indicate the difficulty of accepting photographs as fantasy, and the firm belief that photographs have special access to truths more profound than what the unaided human eye can readily prove. Causing a sensation at the time of their publication, many audiences were thoroughly convinced by their claims.



Of course, not all who saw the photographs were whole-heartedly taken in by the magic of the fairies, and rejected them without the slightest of hesitations. Elsie's father, who helped the girls develop the film, was amused by the images, but more than a little skeptical of their implications – even asking what the 'bits of paper' in front of Frances were. The dismissed photographs might have been ultimately discarded and forgotten if Elsie's mother hadn't happened to attend a meeting of the Theosophical Society in nearby Bradford soon after their creation, and learned of the movement's spiritual interests and firm beliefs in nature spirits such as fairies. Always seeking out physical manifestations of the elusive plane of spirits and fairies, the photographs were immediately well-received by the society's members when presented in a 1919 meeting where Edward Gardner, a leading member of the Theosophical movement, excitedly took it upon himself to further examine the girls' original glass-plate negatives. Photographic expert and fellow spiritualist Harold Snelling confirmed the images' authenticity, concluding that the plate was a single exposure and that the figures were not painted on to the background, declaring them as unmanipulated photographs.¹⁰

Reaching Beyond the Frame

This validation caught the interest of Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes series. Despite being the creator of the calculating consulting detective, known for his cool logic and lack of sentiment in deducing evidence from the visible, Conan Doyle was also a spiritualist, and already believed firmly in the existence of fairies. However, his attention was especially piqued by Snelling's appraisal of the photographs – which seemed to offer incontrovertible evidence of their existence. With Conan Doyle's narrative and validation, the photographs catapulted to the height of popular attention, and the tale of the girls in Cottingley quickly rose to the status of legend. For many it seemed that the existence of fairies had finally been proven, and the favorable assessment of the creator of Sherlock Holmes certainly carried great weight (for, to quote Sherlock Holmes, 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.')

¹¹ As Conan Doyle expressed:

Victorian science would have left the world hard and clean and bare, like a landscape in the moon; but this science is in truth but a little light in the darkness, and outside that limited circle of definite knowledge we see the loom and shadow of gigantic and fantastic possibilities around us.¹²

¹⁰ Krystek, Lee. "The Case of the Cottingley Fairies." *The UnMuseum*. The Museum of Natural Mystery, 2000. <<http://www.unmuseum.org/fairies.htm>> 31 Jan. 2015 [accessed 16 Feb 2015]

¹¹ Doyle, Arthur Conan, and Christopher Roden. *The Sign of the Four*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 35.

¹² Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Coming of the Fairies*. (London: Pavilion), 1997, p. 32.



But even aside from debates on the magical properties of a photograph, even simple interpretations often unfetter from the rational, and are swayed more by desire than by fact. Certainly, the viewers of the Cottingley photographs based their appraisals not on the basis of what was displayed, but on less cognizant judgments and beliefs. Clairvoyant Geoffrey Hodson believed in the existence of spirits, and in fact reported seeing everything that the girls could see and more when visited Cottingley in August 1921, although the girls were unable to produce any additional photographs as proof.

The technicians at Kodak were significantly more reserved in their celebration of the photographs, however, and even though the company could find no evidence that the photographs had been faked, they ultimately declined to bestow the photographs with a certificate of authenticity concluding that, ‘after all, as fairies couldn’t be true, the photographs must have been faked somehow.’¹³ And, of course, although Sherlock Holmes strove to ensure that emotions do not cloud his judgment and reason, Conan Doyle reportedly sank into a deep depression after losing his son in the First World War, and sought comfort in Spiritualism – which, although lacking in the solidity of proof, promised the possibility of life continuing beyond the grave. For, though a photograph is created by mechanical means, the formation of human belief is markedly less concerned with technicalities. In many ways, it seems a photograph cannot exist without an imposed frame of sensibility, and that the camera as a rational machine does not exist unhaunted by an imaginative spirit. In analysis, facts have a tendency to tangle with interpretations, and the intentions of their narratives must be dissected and understood.

Indeed, just as fairies were called into being out of desire for their presence and discredited solely through a disbelief in their reality, assessments of Charles Dodgson’s photography seem particularly prone to the affectations of personal inclination. In the BBC documentary on *The Secret World of Lewis Carroll* (2015), which marked the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Alice in Wonderland*, forensic imagery analyst David Anley examined a possible photograph of Dodgson’s which a documentary researcher discovered in a French museum and which potentially depicted a nude Lorina Liddell as a young teenager, and thus at an inappropriate age. If proved authentic, the documentary argued, the image could conclusively determine whether Dodgson’s artistic endeavors fit within the acceptable practices of his time. But although Anley subjected the image to forensic tests and compared facial characteristics of Lorina at different ages with the unknown

¹³ Smith, Paul (1997), "The Cottingley Fairies: The End of a Legend", in Narváez, Peter, *The Good People* (Lexington: U of Kentucky, 1997), p. 14.

image, he was still unable to conclusively determine that the image was indeed of Lorina. Instead, Anley cited his 'gut instinct' that the image was one of Dodgson's.¹⁴

Visual literacy seems to convey with it all of the complexity of traditional literary analysis. Each element of a visual record presents itself a sign to be interpreted, deemed important by its very act of preservation – representing the world through signifiers, and as code waiting to be read. Photography, by its very nature, is a medium which at once suggests a realization of reality, and, at the same time, its novel construction. Both the taking and the reading of a photograph indicates an impulse to not just consume information, but to digest and understand it – to become a participant and active organizer of reality. In the creation and firm belief of its narratives, reality is often simplified and overlooked in favor of the mind's own workings, and bridges between reality and fiction are often well traversed.

But if the purpose of a photograph is to articulate something about the sitter or the photographer, it is not unreasonable that photographer's psyche is always partially on trial in the reading of a photograph. Indeed, photography and psychology are often understood as intimately related. In her book *Mirrors of Memory: Freud, Photography, and the History of Art*, Mary Bergstein explores the extent to which photography shaped and influenced some of Sigmund Freud's thinking and theories of psychoanalysis, and the writings of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan have also theorized the image, publishing several essays and books of photography, such as *Esquisses Photographiques* (1856) and contributing to leading French photography journals such as *La Lumière* and *Le Moniteur de la Photographie*.¹⁵ In a paper first presented at the Marienbad Congress in 1936, for example, Lacan develops the concept of 'The Mirror Stage' of infant development, which drew on previous studies of physiology, psychology, and the theories of Sigmund Freud. Lacan focuses on the infant's recognition of his own reflection in the mirror as significant in the process of self-identification and the realization of subjectivity. Lacan outlines a world defined by the image and the observer; a world influenced by perspective and ordered by interpretation and identification.¹⁶

So though the mechanical transformations imposed by the camera seem of less consequence than the materials of traditional art forms, the photographer's intentions do manifest in every implied decision of framing, light, subjects, and moment – equip two people with identical cameras and tasks, and their photographs

¹⁴ "The Secret World of Lewis Carroll." *YouTube*. Swan Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 31 Jan. 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Irlpvtwu1Rs>> [accessed 26 July 2016].

¹⁵ Hannavy, John. *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*. 2 Bd., Vol. 1: A-I, Index, Vol. 2, J-Z, Index. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008).

¹⁶ Lacan, Jacques, H  lo  se Fink, and Bruce Fink. *  crits: The First Complete Edition in English*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 150.



will inevitably come out differently. Visible renderings of the processes of perspective, framing, and imagined narrative seemingly catch in a photograph, which presents a physical catalogue, not just of a scene, but of the mind's inner workings. Therefore, to properly understand a photograph seems to necessitate an understanding photographer's mind, even a superficial one. The photographer's perspective seems to stare back out through the image of each photograph, their mental histories preserved as distinctly as what they have placed before the lens. Though art may be considered independently of its creator, the life of the artist invariably affects the understanding of their work, and therefore cannot be considered completely irrelevant.

Resisting straight readings, perhaps Dodgson's most famous and hotly-debated image, however, attracting speculation about the relationships he formed in his life than any other, is a photograph from 1858 showing Alice Liddell as 'The Beggar Maid.' Due as much to the preexisting interest in the narrative of Dodgson's relationship with Alice as much as to the unusualness of her pose and expression, this photograph is often held up as clear evidence of the hypersexualized relationships Dodgson formed with his child-friends, and, in particular, his romantic interest in Alice Liddell. As the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online archives delights, 'This outcast beggar will arouse in the passer-by as much lust as pity. Indeed, Alice looks at us with faint suspicion, as if aware that she is being used as an actor in an incomprehensible play.'¹⁷ While falling short of explicit, the image – depicting Alice in rags which are slipping off, staring expectantly at the photographer, cupped hand at chest, hips to one side, and, most shockingly, nipple exposed – undoubtedly falls into ambiguous territory. But though it has proven incontrovertibly troubling to modern critics, it seems nevertheless to have been widely viewed and accepted as non-sexual at the time of its making. The photograph was presented to the Liddell family, and was proudly displayed in their home.

'The Beggar Maid' plays internally with reference and allusion, and like most photographic tableau, as Charlotte Cotton explains in her book *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, it represents an entire narrative distilled into a single image, harkening back to the pointed and intentional language of props and gestures found in eighteenth and nineteenth-century painting.¹⁸ The photograph was most likely inspired by the eponymous poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, which tells the story of a king who falls in love with a beggar woman, ultimately proposing and making her queen. Though the disheveled image of Alice is nearly always presented alone in modern critical readings and is often minutely scrutinized for what can be revealed of Dodgson's internal state, Roger Taylor in *Lewis Carroll, Photographer* suggests that 'The Beggar Maid' was meant to be viewed a diptych, paired with nearly

¹⁷ The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Alice Liddell as 'The Beggar Maid'" *"The Beggar Maid"* The Collection Online, 2000. <<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283092>> [accessed 31 Jan. 2015].

¹⁸ Cotton, Charlotte. *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. (London: Thames & Hudson), 2015, p. 8.



identical, and now less-circulated, photograph of Alice in the same location, dressed in her best outfit in order to represent the other side of the tale.¹⁹

Equipped with this knowledge, this contrasting set of photographs can just as easily be said to represent Dodgson's well-documented and defined class biases. Indeed, Dodgson often asserted that documenting the childhoods of the lower classes was of little interest to him, as it did not carry with it the whimsical charm of the upper classes. With the knowledge that Alice Liddell was of high society, therefore, these images can perhaps be read as in many ways romanticizing child poverty. Though Alice's clothes are artistically ruffled as 'The Beggar Maid,' her feet and skin are clean, and her hair is kempt. She is kept by the garden wall, as if in a fairy tale, and in the colorized version of the image, her skirt is painted red, to look like velvet.

These considerations unsettle the iconography of Dodgson's 'Beggar Maid,' and throw into question whether the clear messages often perceived in its subtleties are not as much the result of context and curation as intent. For, similar to the framing of a single photograph, the curation of an entire body of art or information can play a large role in their interpreted meanings and narratives.

The Mind's Eye

So perhaps the most encompassing fairy tale of all is the idea that subjectivity has no important play in the interpretation of reality, and that it is ever possible to fully understand a scene or person in a truthful way – or to definitively access anything other than the mind's own workings. Like photographs of fairies and angels, interpretations and remembrances seem destined to exist in indefinite double exposure of truth and desire, insisting sincerely upon their truthfulness in the same breath as their conscious creation, and unable to fully dismiss their own plays of possibility.

Indeed, for sixty years, Elsie and Frances fixedly refused to speak to the truth or validity of their fairy images, merely replying when asked that they had managed to photograph figments of their imagination. Elsie, in a 1966 interview, suggested that she had managed to photograph her own thoughts, but refused to say more.²⁰ It took the passing of Conan Doyle and most of the respectable supporters of the photographs for the girls, without the fear of bringing about too much disappointment or embarrassment to their supporters, to finally admit to the fakery and deception of the photographs during interviews in the early 1980s. Elsie, then an old woman in her eighties, admitted to the use of cardboard cutouts of fairies copied from *The Queen's Gift Book*, a well-known children's book at the time, and noted that sympathy for

¹⁹ Taylor, Roger, Edward Wakeling, and Lewis Carroll. Lewis Carroll, Photographer: The Princeton University Library Albums. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2002.

²⁰ Magnússon, Magnús. *Fakes, Forgers & Phoneyes: Famous Scams and Scamps*. (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2007), p.104.



Of the five photographs taken by Elsie and Frances, the first four photographs clearly depict fairies – Frances is shown by the waterfall surrounded by fairies, and, in another photograph, gazing in amusement at a flying fairy. Elsie sits on a lawn interacting with a gnome, and is offered a posy by a fairy. The fifth photograph, however, taken in August of 1920, is somewhat different in appearance than the preceding photographs. The fairies it shows are not clearly defined, and appear to be largely transparent, their boundaries uncertain and blurred. The photograph also contained an element which neither of the girls had intended or predicted at the time of its making – apparently a nest-like formation in the middle of the grass, later interpreted by fairy specialists as a magnetized sun-bath.

Beyond its mystifying content, the last photograph has also proven to be the most elusive in its analysis, its indications as elusive as the fairies themselves. Even its rightful authorship is uncertain. Both Elise and Frances claimed to have taken the photograph, and as it is likely that it is the product of an accidental double-exposure of two separate exposures, both of their claims may be at least partially true. The fifth photograph, the most oblique in its claims, has also proven the least willfully dismissed – its uncertainty causing pause, its intangibility engaging. Of course, the cousins eventually grew up, leaving behind the desires of childhood, and the attention of the rest of the world wandered and diminished. And yet, even as she discredited and explained away the other images in interviews and writings, Frances always maintained that the fifth photograph was real – insisting, until the end of her life, ‘There were fairies at Cottingley.’²²

²² Cooper, Joe, p. 240.



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