

A LETTER TO MARTIN

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Mr. Martin Gardner
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Dear Martin,

In London recently, I bought a copy of the *Definitive Edition* of the *Annotated Alice*, at the bookshop in the British Library (where the books from the British Museum were relocated a few years ago). It was a wonderful reading experience. I had read your original *Annotated Alice* ages ago, but this was like reading the Alice books for the first time.

I made a few notes as I was reading.

1. On p. 171, when the Red Queen says: “When you say ‘hill’, the Queen interrupted, “I could show you hills, in comparison with which you’d call that a valley”; and Alice objects: “a hill can’t be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense —”; I suspect that Dodgson was reacting to something in Hans Christian Andersen’s story “Elverhøj” (the *Elf Hill*, which is very famous and was even made into a ballet). The Troll King (the Mountain King, or Dovregubben, in Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, written later) from Norway, is visiting the Elf King in Denmark; and the Troll King’s ill-mannered son says, regarding the “Elf Hill” of the title, “You call this a *hill*? In Norway, we would call it a *hole*!” (Denmark is very flat and Norway is very mountainous.) Alice expresses Dodgson’s mathematical view that what is convex cannot be concave. (We would need to know when the English translation of “Elverhøj” reached Oxford, and if Dodgson is likely to have read it.)
2. It is interesting to compare Dodgson and Andersen. Both were men who liked children and never married, or even seem to have come very close. Both wrote children’s stories with at least one eye on the adult audience, and both consciously dispensed with the need to end children’s stories with a moral. Both were translated into dozens of languages, and are still popular today. (Denmark is planning a major celebration of the 200th anniversary of H.-C. Andersen’s birth, in 2005.)
3. On p. 192, you quote Carroll as writing: “In composing the Walrus and the Carpenter, I had no particular poem in mind”. It is certainly true that in its entirety, this poem is not a specific parody of any other. But the first three

stanzas, and the first one in particular, were surely “inspired” by Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which has several stanzas about the way the sun was shining, e.g.,

“The sun now rose upon the right,
Out of the sea came he,
And he shone bright, and on the left
Went down into the sea.”

(Carroll couldn’t resist parodying the least poetic outputs of the Lake Poets.) But it also seemed to me that Carroll was also parodying the explicit *moral* of the Ancient Mariner: “He prayeth best who loveth best
All creatures great and small...”

with the treatment of the oysters by the Walrus and the Carpenter.

4. On p. 212 you have a note explaining what a “teetotum” is. Many of your readers would be surprised to learn that this is precisely the kind of spinning four-sided top, called a “dreidle”, with which Jewish children play on Chanukah. (The four Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *heh*, and *shin*, are on the four sides, instructing the player, respectively, to take a) nothing, b) everything, c) half, or d) a negative amount, from the pot.)
5. On your notes on page 235, you indicate that the inspiration for Carroll reintroducing the Hare and the Hatter as Anglo-Saxons named Haigha and Hatta is obscure. My vague recollection from high school English history (more than fifty years ago) is that Anglo-Saxon history in England begins with two warriors named Hengist and Horsa. Quite likely the Liddell sisters had learned something like this from one of their tutors, or seen it in the play that you mentioned, and Carroll couldn’t resist wordplay on these names.
6. There are many Britishisms that are still in current use but unfamiliar to Americans (e.g., that a *pudding* is any sort of sweet or dessert, or even a different food entirely as in Yorkshire pudding); and things that have become less familiar even in England during our own lifetimes (like the old pound-shilling-pence currency; and “English” chess notation, which even in the UK has been giving way to “algebraic”). If there is ever a post-definitive edition (the “pluperfect Alice”?), it may be useful to include some glossaries, and two chessboards side by side to exhibit the two notations. (Even in English notation, **N** replaced **Kt.** for “knight” several decades ago.)
7. Another mathematician who had some things in common with Dodgson was the late Paul Erdős, who also never married and was very fond of children. But the most striking similarity was their common preoccupation with aging and death, starting at an earlier age than is customary.

8. I recall sending you (or at least mentioning) a clipping from a British paper, after a previous trip to England about ten years ago, with the information that you summarize in your note on p. 64 about the grin being all that Mr. Joel Birenbaum could see of the cat's head after kneeling down in a church in Croft-on-Tees where Dodgson's father had once been the rector. It is the custom in Anglican churches for the congregants to kneel (usually on a *prie-dieu*, several inches above the floor) during the service (a fact which Mr. Birenbaum may not have known?), so that seeing the cat's face disappear except for the grin would have been experienced by the entire congregation. In the clipping I saw, Mr. Birenbaum further speculated that Dodgson had perhaps misremembered the locale, and transferred it from Croft-on-Tees to Cheshire, where his father had earlier preached. But you make it clear that "to grin like a Cheshire cat" was an established simile in England long before the Alice books were written. The Carroll innovation (as far as I'm aware) was to have the cat disappear except for the grin.

9. In your notes on p. 23, referring to Carroll's parodies of once well known poems, you promised "...all the originals will be reprinted in this edition." But you never included Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*, a.k.a. *The Leech-Gatherer*, the original for the White Knight's *The Aged Aged Man* (a.k.a. *Ways and Means*, etc., etc.).

This is all I can think of for now.

Best regards,



Solomon W. Golomb

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