

Who Mutilated Lewis Carroll's Diaries?

By Karoline Leach (first published 1998)

One of the most persistent and puzzling questions hanging over the life of Lewis Carroll is what may have befallen the mass of material that is now missing from his private diaries.

Charles Dodgson began keeping a personal diary at some time in his childhood, and it was a habit he seems to have continued throughout most of his life, though according to his nephew and biographer Stuart Collingwood, there was a brief hiatus while he was at Rugby school ([Cohen, *Interviews and Recollections*, 11](#)). None of the very early diaries remain and little is known about what may have befallen them, though it seems quite possible that the last person to have possession of them was Collingwood - a potentially significant fact as we shall see later on.

At about the age of 21, he began a series of numbered diary volumes that he was to keep until his death. Volume 1 of this series was begun before October 1853 and the final volume, number 13, ended in December 1897, just a few weeks before his unexpected death from pneumonia.

Dodgson died leaving all of these 13 volumes behind him, probably more or less intact. However, at some time between his death and the centenary of his birth in 1932, four volumes vanished and have not been seen since.

The favoured public explanation given by the Dodgson family for the loss of the material is that it was simply and regrettably mislaid somewhere, although no one seemed very clear about when or by whom, and different versions tended to keep appearing. The first of these seems to have been given to the author Helmut Gernsheim in about 1949. The story at this time was that the diaries had been lost while "the Dodgson nieces" (Carroll's nieces Violet and Menella - names we will have cause to return to again many times) had been moving house to Leamington Spa during the second world war. ([Gernsheim, v](#)). Another slightly different take on the same theme was offered by the family when the edited version of the diaries finally appeared in print in 1953. This time it was claimed the missing volumes had mysteriously vanished from a cardboard box while being stored in a cellar.

Although earlier biographers of Carroll tended to be too polite to seriously question these explanations, for modern researchers the story of diaries falling out of boxes and into oblivion has to be seen as part of the wider question of Lewis Carroll's mythology and the various attempts that have

been made to control and manipulate it. The missing diary volumes have to be set alongside the seven deliberately cut text pages from the remaining volumes, for while it remains possible that some of them were cut by Dodgson, there is proof, as we shall see later, that at least two of them were not, and it seems more probable that all of them were removed after his death by someone in his family. So, what does this mean for modern admirers of and researchers into Lewis Carroll?

One of the most immediately obvious things when one looks closely at the location of the majority of the cut pages is the fact that they cluster very closely around the same period covered by the supposedly 'lost' diary volumes. All but one of the seven cut text-pages occur between the years 1855 -1863 and all four of the "lost" volumes fall between almost exactly the same period, 1853 and 1862. Thus, as we show in more detail elsewhere, with the exception of one page, all the missing diary material occurs in a single eleven year period of Carroll's life

On the face of it, this does not seem very much like pure accident or the arbitrary and disconnected editing of touchy relatives, with over-sensitive feelings and no particular agenda. The mutilators of the record seem to have confined their attentions to one relatively small area of Dodgson's life, for reasons we do not presently understand. Trying to divine as much as possible about how and why this material is now missing is a vital step to trying to reconstruct (as far as possible) what may have been happening to Dodgson during this missing time. The question lies at the heart of Lewis Carroll's enigma. It remains an enduring literary and biographical mystery, with twists added by the fact that for so long it has been to some extent shrouded - not simply by the persistent secrecy of the family - but also by the curious action of 'the myth'.

Can we determine what happened to it? When was it last seen? Who had possession of it before it vanished? Why might they have destroyed it? Can we even try to answer these questions?

Firstly we need to be aware that Dodgson himself definitely did cut a number of pages out of his own diaries. However most of these seem to have been cut while still blank; there's nothing to show any pages of text were removed by Dodgson himself, though it remains possible some were.

The first person to handle Lewis Carroll's papers after his death in January 1898 was his younger brother Wilfred, one of the estate's executors. It's known, as will soon be shown in another article on this site that Wilfred burned very large amounts of the papers he found - possibly at his brother's request. Subsequently, a large percentage of Carroll's portfolio of photographs, and other personal collections were sold off at public auction, while his letters continued for many years to trickle away through private

sales into private collections all over the world, where many of them are still untraced and unrecorded. But there is no record of Wilfred doing anything with his brother's diaries, and indeed we know that after the various burnings and auctions had broken up much of the collection, that a core of Carroll's most personal papers still remained in the Dodgson family's hands. This included Carroll's letter register, 'thousands' of letters and - crucially - all 13 volumes of his private diary.

Most of this archive seems to have been given or loaned almost immediately, in the spring of 1898, to Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, Carroll's 28 year old nephew who had rather improbably been appointed his official biographer by the family. Collingwood's biography made little use of this rich source of material; however, it *did* quote from all four of the now missing diary volumes - thus putting it beyond doubt that they were still extant and in Collingwood's possession at the time of his writing.

Collingwood finished writing his biography of Carroll in the summer of 1898, and the papers seem to have been returned to Wilfred. After Wilfred died they were looked after by his surviving sisters and when the last of these died in 1930, the 'Carroll archive' became the responsibility of Wilfred's children: his eldest son Charles Hassard Wilfred and (most significantly for us) his two daughters Menella and Violet. After Charles Hassard's death in 1941, the two women managed the estate alone until they died, Menella in 1963 and Violet three years later, by which time the four diary volumes and the seven cut pages were already vanished. So, somewhere and at some time between 1898, when Collingwood used the diaries for his biography, and 1969 when the remaining volumes were sold to the public, someone had done something fairly drastic to them. Who was it and when? Can we possibly tell?

There is apparently a persistent rumour within the family that Stuart Collingwood deliberately destroyed part of the diary while it was in his possession, to protect the family reputation. This is in fact highly possible. He was apparently well aware of the literary and historical importance of the material, and something he wrote in his biography of his uncle makes it clear that he did not make public all he had found there.

Commenting on the sadness endemic in Lewis Carroll's love poetry, Collingwood made this short and now justly famous cryptic observation:

One cannot read this little volume without feeling that the shadow of some disappointment lay over Lewis Carroll's life. Such I believe to have been the case.... But those who loved him would not wish to lift the veil from these dead sanctities, nor would any purpose be served by so doing.

[\(Collingwood, 355\)](#)

The fact that Collingwood admitted to believing there were aspects of his uncle's life ('dead sanctities') that ought never to be made public adds support to the family rumour that it was he who destroyed at least some of the now missing material, particularly given the fact that some of this missing material (two of the four missing volumes and one of the missing pages) covers the precise period when the love poems Collingwood refers to above were being written. It therefore seems quite plausible that Collingwood's determination not to 'lift the veil' may have gone beyond mere reticence and involved actual destruction of material that revealed something of the 'dead sanctities' he was anxious to keep private.

The possibility that it was Collingwood who was responsible for removing some material seems further supported by a letter he wrote to his cousin Menella in 1932, in answer to some enquiries she had sent him. From his replies it's possible to divine the questions Menella is asking and, crucially, one of them appears to concern the whereabouts of the missing diary volumes. Menella seems to be genuinely searching for information, which implies that neither she nor her sister Violet or brother Charles have any idea of what has happened to them and almost certainly can't be implicated in getting rid of them. Even more suggestively, Collingwood replies to her enquiry with a lie. In response to her question about the missing diary-volumes he claims:

I don't think I ever had the *complete* diary.
(*Letter in Dodgson Family Collection, Surrey History Centre, Woking, cat.no. F/17/2*).

This was of course completely untrue. Collingwood had very definitely had the 'complete diary'; his biography quotes from every one of the now missing volumes. In fact he had not simply 'had' the missing diaries, he was very likely one of the last people who had ever seen them. So, we are left wondering why he felt the need to lie about this to his cousin Menella.

So, can we assume, from circumstantial evidence like this, that Stuart Collingwood was the person who mutilated Dodgson's diaries? Such an explanation has the appeal of simplicity, but the facts don't seem to support such a straightforward interpretation. In fact the balance of the evidence seems to point unequivocally to the existence of at least two quite separate perpetrators.

Crucially for the unravelling of this puzzle, the stumps of the missing pages indicate two very different methods of cutting. The majority of the pages - five out of seven - have all been cut with ruler-straight precision, as if someone had used a cut-throat razor or craft knife. In contrast the other two stumps are jagged and ragged and seem to have been snipped ineptly with short-bladed nail scissors pretty inadequate to the task.

The discovery of the bizarre 'cut pages in diary document' has allowed even further light to be shed on this. This document seems to have been written out by Lewis Carroll's niece Violet Dodgson, with additions by Menella, around the time of the centenary of his birth in 1932. It contains a summary of the contents of two of the now-missing pages, together with a summary of a third page that was not cut out but simply heavily inked over. The summaries were apparently written just before the pages were removed, and the implication is that since Violet and Menella wrote the summaries they also cut out the two pages. Most interestingly, the two pages concerned here are also the two that are cut differently from the other five. (Document in Dodgson Family Collection, Surrey History Centre, Woking, cat.no. F/17/1).

The implication is therefore that the two jagged-cut missing pages were done by Violet and Menella, whose other strange antics and frantic secrecy are gone into elsewhere.

The facts as we presently know them seem to suggest at least two different people - probably Violet and Menella Dodgson and their cousin Stuart Collingwood - were responsible for removing most, if not all, of what is now missing from Dodgson's diaries. But the question of motive - why did these people take the decision to mutilate Lewis Carroll's private papers? is a much deeper and more difficult puzzle which may never be answerable in anything but guesswork and speculation. The fact that nearly all the missing material covers a relatively brief period of Dodgson's life, and the fact that this period can independently be shown to have contained unexplained pain for Dodgson as well as evident religious difficulties and other signs of unrest, is clearly food for thought. The decade of Dodgson's life that has been so severely edited by whatever means, is also the most turbulent decade he seems to have experienced. Additionally Collingwood did hint that his own reason for concealment lay in the genesis of Dodgson's love poetry which was also written during this same turbulent and little-understood period. (*see Wakeling, vols. 4 & 5.,passim*).

This implies that there was an incident or perhaps a plurality of incidents during this period that were the targets for concealment by Carroll's family. What these incidents were we do not presently know and it's likely we will never be able to be certain, but there are obvious implications we can't ignore. We probably cannot afford to assume - as so many earlier writers have done - that these things are all unconnected with each other and simply look no further. Someone seems to have attempted to erase a significant chunk of something from the record at a time of known difficulty in Carroll's life. It becomes the work of posterity to try and put it back if possible, or at very least to draw attention to the lacunae.

But in the current position of the Carroll-biography, as it has grown from such powerful and uncontrolled mythologising, this has presented its own problems. As mentioned above, full assimilation of the questions hanging over the lost diary material involves also an assimilation of possibilities that traditional Carrollianism has always rejected. It requires an acknowledgement that Carroll's life may have been deep, complex, even secretive, and above all else adult. It requires an acknowledgment that Carroll may - only may - have been embroiled in actions or ideas that could not be acknowledged by his 'respectable' family. These things are anathema to the very essence of what 'Carroll' has been assumed as an article of faith to be, and assimilation requires a shift of perspective that is not easy for anyone to accomplish. So, there is a curious psychological duality operating over this issue, with some biographers and writers being driven to make increasingly extreme and rather irrational 'rationales' for continuing to disregard or gloss over the question of the missing material while still preserving their self-image as serious investigators.

How will the situation continue? Will the need to maintain 'Carroll' prevail and continue to ignore the questions posed by the gaps in his private journals? or will the new attempt at re-analysis reshape the debate and perhaps begin to impose a clearer understanding, or at least a different mythology?

Bibliography

- Cohen, Morton N., ed., *Lewis Carroll: Interviews and Recollections*, Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1989.
- Cohen, Morton N., 'Who Censored Lewis Carroll?', *The Times*, 23 January 1982, p. 9.
- Collingwood, Stuart Dodgson, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*, London: Unwin, 1898.
- Gernsheim, Helmut, *Lewis Carroll, Photographer*, New York: Dover, 1969.
- Green, Roger Lancelyn, ed., *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll*, 2 vols., London: Cassell, 1953.
- Wakeling, Edward, ed., *Lewis Carroll's Diaries*, 9 vols., Luton: White Stone, 1993-2004.
- Woolf, Virginia, 'Lewis Carroll', in Phillips, Robert, *Aspects of Alice*, London: Penguin, 1974, pp. 78-81.