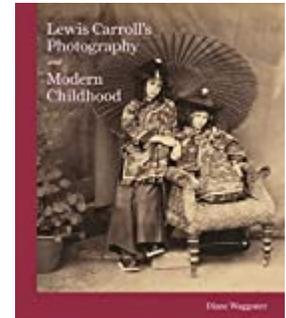


**Diane Waggoner.** *Lewis Carroll's Photography and Modern Childhood.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Illustrations. xv + 264 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-19318-2.



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In 1856, the same year Charles Lutwidge Dodgson assumed the pen name Lewis Carroll, the young Oxford Don began making photographs—a biographical detail that, in light of Diane Waggoner’s extensive new study, seems more than coincidental. Like Dodgson’s famously humorous and quirky letters and stories, photography was to be a means of engaging with children, and with the subject of childhood generally, for the next twenty-five years of his life; indeed, as Waggoner makes clear in this sumptuously illustrated and meticulously researched book, Dodgson’s words and pictures were intimately related. Moreover, and arguably contributing to the later success of the *Alice* books, Victorian childhood was at a critical juncture, the 1850s and ’60s being a time when the concept itself “was in transition, cementing its modern iteration as a life stage with characteristics distinct from adulthood” (p. 1). Paying scrupulous attention to the social realities of that transition for Dodgson’s child friends and their parents—the expectations and conventions of the white, upper-middle-class Oxford world that produced most of his small

muses—Waggoner illuminates the complexity of her subject, bringing to it both fresh context and academic rigor.

The path is a tricky one: as Waggoner acknowledges from the outset, twenty-first-century views of Dodgson’s child photographs are inevitably shaped by what she calls “heightened awareness concerning abuse against children and the inequities of power” (p. 4). It is hard to look at these images without at least some postmodern sensibility that history allows us to see things the Victorians could not and that modern-day readings of these photographs of children are more fully informed about their true significance. Indeed, such a view informs most discussion of Carroll’s child photography. While Waggoner does not ignore the ongoing debate about just what Dodgson was up to with his meticulous lists of girl names, his detailed accounts of meetings, locations, and photographic suitability, or the many hours (again, dutifully recorded) spent at the seaside watching children play on the sand, she somehow manages to prevent that question from overwhelming the book

and keeps speculation to a controlled minimum. Her stated purpose regarding the photographs is to “recover the cultural work they performed in the latter half of the nineteenth century”—to read them, in other words, as they might have been read in their own time without attempting “to recover the exact or underlying nature of Dodgson’s desires by reading between the lines” (p. 19). This is, obviously, no easy task.

For one thing, and as a number of details unearthed by this work suggest, even in its own time the practice of Victorian child photography is likely to have been viewed differently by different people; some may also have gradually changed their thinking about “Uncle” Dodgson’s keen interest in photographing their offspring. A number of Dodgson’s letters to parents delicately reference not only the anticipated taking of such photographs, and the need or lack thereof for chaperones, but also what state of undress might be permitted. Some of the more awkward correspondence gives off a whiff of threatened scandal or maternal disapproval. Perhaps most problematic are the infamous missing diary entries that might explain the odd rift in friendships or cessation of visits to Dodgson’s studio and, above all, the apparently abrupt end to the previously warm relationship he had earlier enjoyed with Alice’s family, the Liddells. For the most part, however, and throughout the twenty-five years during which Dodgson was photographing, visits to his studio seem to have inspired only friendly pleasantries between the adults and warm recollections years later on the part of the children photographed. One of the most satisfying results of Waggoner’s research, indeed, is its restoration of a number of these voices to images that have, over the years, been largely detached from the reality of their child subjects.

For that reason alone, this is a book to read carefully, as well as to look at, and it will be a vital addition to Carroll scholarship. Waggoner picks through various scholarly approaches to the photographs and provides a useful, if diplomatic, guide

to the names and points of view that have shaped broader discussion of this subject. Discounting none of the various lines of thought, she nonetheless makes it clear that her net is wider and her consideration of the photographs more attentive to chronology and the passage of time. She does not gloss over the peculiarities of the man himself, either; as she notes, “Dodgson was not just a typical participant in the Victorian culture of the child, but a man of remarkable oddities and obsessions.” Her aim is not to “whitewash” but rather to “contemplate the ways in which Dodgson expressed his fascination with children”—to describe, in other words, the what and the how of these pictures rather than the why (p. 19). The result is a descriptive and measured account of the *making* of photographs whose subjects are familiar to any Carroll scholar, as well as a number that are less well known—which ultimately makes the book something of a corrective in terms of its content and approach.

While the introduction gives a generous biographical and historical overview, situating both the man and his work in terms of social expectations, pressures, and conventions, perhaps its most important observation is that Dodgson’s photography “was neither stable nor constant,” its terms and conditions changing over time according to subjects and circumstances. This appears to be the organizational principle for the five chapters that follow, each attending to the evolving social and artistic milieu with which Dodgson interacted. Whether it is actually possible to “establish the meaning of photography for him” is debatable (indeed, the introduction gives the reader reason to assume it is not) (p. 20). Nonetheless, by reviewing some of the prints by well-known photographers of the day that Dodgson purchased for his own albums—Oscar Gustave Rejlander, Clementina Hawarden, Henry Peach Robinson, Julia Margaret Cameron—as well as his notes on exhibitions visited and images admired, Waggoner shows the development of his aesthetic within Victorian visual culture and the ways his views on photography as

an art form were intimately related to his desire to make different kinds of art both for and about children.

The second chapter, “Liddell Girls,” is the anchor chapter to the book; it not only examines the photographs of Alice and her sisters but also considers how they reflected and influenced adult expectations about the visual representation of children. By charting the circumstances of their production, and thus reading them in terms of the friendship between Dodgson and the Liddells, Waggoner explores how these images departed from professional studio photographs in which the child was presented as a future, or miniature, adult. Dodgson’s photographs of little girls, by contrast, mostly show them to exist “in a separate world,” Waggoner argues, with “no coding of adult deportment”—sometimes barefoot, rumped, almost always in decidedly un-adult pose (p. 84). There was artistic precedent for such work: eighteenth-century child portraiture provided a model with its emphasis on innocence and the natural world. The painterly influence on Dodgson’s photographs is, unsurprisingly, well documented (Waggoner is an art historian by training and photographic curator at the National Gallery of Art), and it brings into focus the self-conscious engagement of his work with the wider art world.

Chapter 3, “Pretty Boys and Little Men,” offers some wonderful material likely to be new to many readers. Dodgson’s series of photographs taken at Twyford, a prep school attended by the sons of upper-middle-class families (including the Liddells and the Dodgsons), gives a glimpse of the masculine world of boarding school life. These photographs were, interestingly, among the few Dodgson considered suitable for public display and sale—perhaps because the boys at Twyford, grouped together in their cricket gear, or bent over their books, already belong to the world outside in a way that their sisters or younger siblings at home do not. Dodgson actually “photographed boys far more than has generally been thought,” mostly the

sons of friends or brothers of his girl sitters; readers familiar with his better-known photographs will recognize many of the last names in this chapter, too—Hatch, Tennyson, Macdonald, Kitchin (p. 116). Indeed, one of the accomplishments of Waggoner’s work is its powerful evocation of a social world whose recreational hobbies, educational convictions, and artistic pursuits directly influenced the concept of childhood during the years Dodgson was making his photographs.

It is within the context of that social world that the final chapters invite us to consider Dodgson’s photographs of theater and performance, in which dressing up, or not dressing at all, was part of the play. Waggoner is wise to put the chapter on the nudes, “In Fairyland,” at the end of the book, by which time the reader has a frame of reference for them. The same is equally true of chapter 4, “Theatrical Transformations,” which examines some of the best-known images—Agnes Weld as Little Red Riding Hood; Xie Kitchin as Penelope Boothby—as well as lesser-known pictures, in terms of Dodgson’s ongoing preoccupation with beauty and childhood. Those twinned obsessions make it appropriate, ultimately, not only that Waggoner’s book is strikingly beautiful but also that it contributes so significantly to the history of childhood itself.

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