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Accessibility
An 1862 Alice: “Cross Purposes”; or, Which Dreamed It?

Robert Lee Wolff

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Alice, who was complaining half-aloud in her canopied bed one evening because the rosy light of sunset was dying down and everything was turning gray. When the tiny fairy Peascblossom appeared and invited Alice to go with her on a trip into the sunset, Alice accepted the invitation, and began to get up. Suddenly she found that she was no bigger than the fairy; and when she stood up on the counterpane, the bed looked like a great hall with a painted ceiling. As she walked towards Peascblossom, she stumbled several times over the tufts that made the pattern. But the fairy took her by the hand and led her towards the foot of the bed. Long before they reached it, however, Alice saw that the fairy was a tall, slender lady, and that she herself was quite her own size. What she had taken for tufts on the counterpane were really bushes of furze, and heather, on the side of a slope.

They are in the countryside, and off on their adventures.

The passage is arresting when one remembers Alice’s namesake, whose frequent changes of size and their accompanying dislocations have prompted so much comment from psychologists. This Alice has been caught twice while she is shrinking: first when she has shrunk to the size of Peascblossom, and again when the process is complete, and she has become the proper size relative to Peascblossom in her new incarnation: a little girl accompanying a fairy who is a grown-up. Our Alice is the heroine of a fairy tale called “Cross Purposes,” written by George MacDonald (1825–1905), novelist and mystic, now remembered chiefly for his children’s stories, At the Back of the North Wind (1871), The Princess and the Goblin (1872), and The Princess and Curdie (1878, 1882), and for his two remarkable dream-narratives for adults, Phantastes (1858) and Lilith (1895). “Cross Purposes” appeared in Dealings with the Fairies, a small volume of MacDonald’s collected stories, in 1867, two years after Alice in Wonderland was
first published. So, on an earlier occasion, when writing about MacDonald’s work, I quite naturally pointed out that in this passage he was imitating the Alice of his good friend Lewis Carroll. It was true, I noted, that, before he had met Carroll and long before Alice, MacDonald in Phantastes had got the hero out of his bedroom, into his dreams, and away into the scenery of fairyland with similar skill. But in “Cross Purposes” the size-changes and the identity of name, I assumed, were borrowed from Lewis Carroll.

There has, however, just come to hand a set of Beeton’s Christmas Annuals — a popular magazine published once each year at Christmas — beginning with the first number, for 1860. In the number for the third season — Christmas 1862 — George MacDonald’s “Cross Purposes” appears: its hitherto unrecorded first publication. The Christmas Annuals went on public sale about 1 December, and were distributed to newsagents and booksellers well before that in preparation for very large sales running to tens of thousands of copies. Even given the speed and docility of London printers in the 1860s, each number would have had to go to press no later than 15 October. And of course any story scheduled for publication in it would have had to be completed considerably earlier than that. So we are reasonably safe in conjecturing that George MacDonald had actually completed “Cross Purposes” by early October 1862 at the latest. If the editor of Beeton’s Christmas Annuals was as exigent as other editors of similar publications, July or August 1862 would be an even more probable date.


Plate I

George MacDonald, a photograph by Lewis Carroll, 1862,
from George MacDonald and His Wife, by Greville MacDonald, M.D.
(New York: The Dial Press Incorporated, 1924)
PLATE II
BENTON'S CHRISTMAS ANNUAL, THIRD SEASON, [1863]; OUTSIDE FRONT COVER
An 1862 Alice: "Cross Purposes"; or, Which Dreamed It?

This renders it impossible any longer to assert that MacDonald was imitating Carroll's Alice when he made his Alice change her size. Carroll told the original version of Alice's Adventures Underground to the three Liddell girls and Canon Duckworth on the picnic of 4 July 1862. But he did not begin to write it down until 13 November 1862, well after "Cross Purposes" had been finished. He did not complete it until about 10 February 1863. And soon afterwards he gave it to the MacDonald family to read. On 9 May 1863, he wrote in his diary, "Heard from Mrs. MacDonald about Alice's Adventures Underground, which I had lent them to read, and which they wish me to publish." George MacDonald's son, Greville, born in 1856, twice long afterwards told in print how the MacDonald children's beloved "Uncle Dodgson" had asked George MacDonald's opinion of his manuscript, "illustrated with pen-and-ink sketches by himself and minutely penned in printing characters." MacDonald suggested that his wife read the story to their children as an experiment. Greville recalled that — aged six — he had "exclaimed that there ought to be sixty thousand volumes of it." He did, however, resent the sudden ending precipitated by Alice's discovery (and announcement) that the characters were all a pack of cards. And Lewis Carroll, who did not like little boys as a usual thing, certainly made an exception for Greville.

"Cross Purposes" appears on p. 15 of the reprint and mentions no periodical appearance before book publication in 1867. Bulloch's work is thorough, and I relied on it in writing my book. But "Cross Purposes" first appeared on pp. 58-63 (small print, double columns) in Beeton's Christmas Annual. (Third Season) Edited by the Publisher. (London: S. O. Beeton, [1862]). While there is no date on the title page, the date 1861 is a certainty. Each issue of the Annual, beginning with the first, was published with an inserted beautifully-illuminated "Almanac": i.e. a calendar, with all Christmas holidays noted, for the coming year. The sec of Annuals has these Almanacs preserved, and that in the number for the third season is for 1862, so the number was issued for Christmas, 1861. In the issue for the first season there is no Almanac, but in its place a voucher, dated 8 December 1860 (further evidence, if any were needed, for the date of 1862 for the third season), in which the publisher, S. O. Beeton, explains that 20,000 copies of the Annual with the Almanac had already been sold, and that the supply of Almanacs was temporarily exhausted. The voucher entitled a purchaser of the Annual to obtain a free Almanac from his bookseller, when they were again available. If 20,000 copies had been sold by 8 December 1860, the date of 1 December for public sale is surely a conservative estimate. As for the time when manuscripts were due, the unpublished manuscript diaries of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who between 1878 and 1892 edited her own Christmas annual, The Mistletoe Bough, show that she had all copy for each Christmas issue available for editing by the previous August.

"W. H. Bond, "The Publication of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," Har-
True, Lewis Carroll and the MacDonalds were intimate friends, and it was natural for him to give them his manuscript to read. But for the first time it is now clear that he did so two months after George MacDonald’s “Cross Purposes” had been published in Beeton’s Christmas Annual for 1862. So it is plausible to suggest that Carroll had read “Cross Purposes,” and had been struck by the heroine’s name and sudden double shrinkage. Carroll’s heroine had to be named Alice after Alice Liddell, so that was pure coincidence; but he may possibly have borrowed the contractions of George MacDonald’s Alice. And if he did not borrow them, he must have been astonished, on reading “Cross Purposes,” to find his friend independently working the same vein of fantasy. Would he not — before going to a publisher — have been more anxious to share with George MacDonald his discovery that their imaginations had been busy with the same phenomena? So while it cannot be proved that Carroll was inspired by “Cross Purposes” or “cleared” his Alice with MacDonald before publishing it, it is surely possible. In any case his far more athletic heroine did not begin to change her size on paper until after MacDonald’s Alice had already been done so.1

1 Yard Library Bulletin, X: 3 (Autumn 1956), 306-314, gives the chronology for the early progress of Alice summarized here. In addition, see Greville MacDonald, George MacDonald and his Wife (London: Allen and Unwin, 1924), p. 344, and Reminiscences of a Specialist (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932), pp. 15-16. When the six-year-old Greville was sitting on the sculptor, Alexander Munro, who used his head as a model for the Boy Riding a Dolphin fountain in Hyde Park, Lewis Carroll pointed out to the child how useful it would be if his head were actually made of marble: he would never have to comb his hair or try to learn his lessons. And Carroll sketched Greville, holding his new marble head in his hands, and terrifying Munro with it.

The remainder of “Cross Purposes” is very different from Alice, except insofar as the heroine’s lengthy adventures prove to be a dream that had lasted only a few moments, since the sun’s light has not yet altogether faded when she awakens. MacDonald made his Alice a squire’s daughter and a “silly” child with that special sanctity that he, like Wordsworth, attributed to the slow-witted. On her trip to fairyland she falls in love with a poor village boy, from whom she separates at once after their return to their homes. Only in fairyland can there be a successful love affair across class lines.
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