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Lewis Carroll In Numberland, by Robin Wilson

Reflections of a wondrous life of pi

Reviewed by Ziauddin Sardar
Friday, 29 August 2008

We remember him largely for his Alice books, but Lewis Carroll was a man of many parts. The literary wizard was a consummate letter writer, a pioneering photographer and a brilliant mathematician. In this loving mathematician's biography, Wilson provides a rounded portrait of a man who had the magical ability to transform ordinary maths into enchanting puzzles and inventive prose and poetry.

The Rev Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was born in 1832 and grew up in Cheshire and Yorkshire; the love of mathematics was a tradition in the Dodgson household. To entertain themselves, the family produced a magazine for which he designed mazes and puzzles. By the time he was 12, the future Lewis Carroll had written a book on geometry.

From Rugby, Dodgson went to Christ Church, Oxford. Wilson provides a detailed portrait of his hard undergraduate life: breakfast at 6.15; chapel at 8.00. After study, lectures and tutorials, there were mandatory walks in his grey coat, grey gloves and silk top hat. More study followed after dinner at five, then a session of letters to friends and family. Not surprisingly, he got a first and came top of his class. The next step was equally natural: a lectureship at his college.

Dodgson was, surprisingly, not a particularly good teacher. His students found him lucid in his mathematics but dry in his emotions. Around the same time, he developed an interest in photography and began writing comic poems. Dodgson, claims Wilson, was one of the first to consider photography as an art form.

But mathematics remained his prime passion. He was fascinated by numbers (42 was his particular favourite), numerical puzzles and paradoxes, mazes and labyrinths, geometric proofs, and logical absurdities like those in the Alice books. Dodgson didn't simply write about the world of mock turtles and maps, gryphons and gravity, Humpty Dumpty and handkerchiefs; he lived it. Many of the problems he occupied himself, such as where the day begins on the hemisphere, ended up in the Alice books.

Dodgson attracted admirers and cranks in equal measure. For many years, he was bombarded by letters containing supposed constructions for squaring the circle or the "proof" that pi has an exact value. To set the record straight, he was forced to write pamphlets which debunked numerous pseudo-mathematical arguments.

Wilson tries hard to make Dodgson's maths accessible and, on the whole, succeeds admirably. But to really appreciate the necessary diversion into Euclid's geometry, it would help to have at least an A-level in maths. Alternatively, you could gloss over the maths and simply revel in the unravelling of an intricate and exquisite mind.

Ziauddin Sardar's 'Balti Britain' will be published by Granta next month

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