

Ruralists and Alice

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In his little handbook called *Illustrators of Alice in Wonderland* Graham Ovenden points out that *Alice in Wonderland* has surely been illustrated by more artists than any other children's book; one is tempted to say than any other fictional work. Alice Liddell whom Lewis Carroll loved as a little girl, and the heroine Alice of the stories he created for her inspire the artists to create still new Alice bearing artist' own image.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was first published in 1865, and the year 1990 was the 125th anniversary of the publication of the Alice story. In England the Brotherhood of Ruralists had devoted their annual group exhibition to the Alice theme. It was a much applauded touring exhibition starting in August and was shown at six places: the southern coastal town Torquay (at Bearnese), Wales (at the Tabernacle), Plymouth (at Plymouth City Museums & Art Gallery), Oxford (Christ Church Picture Gallery), and London (the Piccadilly Gallery). They were quite popular and received many favourable reviews. But what is the Brotherhood of Ruralists?

In 1971 Ann Arnold and Graham Arnold formed The Broadheath Brotherhood with their friend David Inshaw. This later became the Brotherhood of Ruralists when Graham and Annie Ovenden, Peter Blake and Jann Haworth joined in 1975. Literally a ruralist is a person who leaves city and moves into country, so the artists chose the name to refer to themselves. As they had all recently moved out of London, they

felt that the word fitted exactly.

Once a year the members of Ruralists have a group exhibition under the common theme and they have exhibited more than 40 times since 1976. In 1976 they first exhibited as a group at the Royal Academy and have had many joint exhibitions as well as gaining considerable individual reputations for many one-man shows. "Family" was the common theme for the year 1991, and "Alice" for 1990.

There is no common style, but if there is any, it is that they all live in nature and get inspirations from nature. Ann Arnold writes in her letter, "We are nourished by natural beauty. We are confirmed that Nature is sacred."

The word "brotherhood" with its deliberate reference to the earlier and honoured artistic association of the 19th century, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, clearly conveys the ties of interest and friendship that brought the painters together. They share their reverence to nature with the Pre-Raphaelite artists. Lewis Carroll also much honoured his contemporary artists, Pre-Raphaelites.

Carroll made friends with Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Arthur Hughes, and Munro. Around 1860 Carroll habitually visited their studios when he went to London. His manuscript of Alice story for Alice Liddell (presented to her in 1862) contains his own drawings. Jeffrey Stern points out in his essay, *Lewis Carroll the Pre-Raphaelite*, that one of Carroll's illustrations of Alice is certainly like Rossetti's drawing "Miss Miller" which Carroll photographed and kept in his album. Another of Carroll's illustrations of Alice with a bottle in her hand has obvious similarities with Arthur Hughes' "Girl with Lilacs" which Carroll bought from Hughes and hung over the mantelpiece in his room in Christ Church. It is

interesting to find this artistic tie between the Ruralists and Carroll in their appreciation of the Pre-Raphaelite artists. Graham Arnold, one of the founder members of the Brotherhood of Ruralists are also much concerned with environmental problems and helives in harmony with nature. Let us introduce some of the Ruralists.

Ann and Graham Arnold live in the deep coutryside of Shropshire in mid-west England. They grow their own vegetables, and have many hives of bees for their own honey. They have a hill where they planted a forest of oaks, birches, and other native trees. They enjoy the natural rythm of seasons and days. For those who are familiar with English literature it may be interesting to know that the jacket of the New Arden Shakespeare was designed by Graham Arnold and the Ruraists.

Graham and Annie Ovenden live in Cornwall, south-west England. They live in a valley where they have created a lake and stocked it with fish, planted many trees, and live in harnomy with wild creatures. Graham Ovenden has a special interest in early photography. He has a large collection of Dodgson's photographs and negatives. Among them are the photographs of Alexandra Kitchen and her brother and sister. With them Carroll had amused himself with an effect of duplicated printings.

Among the two Alice books *Through the Looking-Glass* does not seem to have had same appeal to artists as *In the Wonderland*. Several artists have illustrated both volumes, but only four seem to have tackled *Looking-Glass* alone, according to Graham Ovenden. Among the four is a Ruralist, Peter Blake. He is one of the founder members of the Brotherhood of the Ruralists and has always had a love for "Alice". When "The Wasp in a Wig", the long missing chapter, was found in 1977, Peter was one of the three illustrators whom Telegraph asked to illustrate the scene

(the other two were Patrick Procktor and Sir Hugh Casson who was the president of the Royal Academy). The chapter was intended to be included right after the Alice's farewell to the White knight, but withdrawn because of Tenniel's strong objection. (One of the explanations says that Tenniel was stung by a wasp as a boy and lost the sight in one eye. If this was true then Carroll's sympathy would have naturally led him to adopt the objection.)

Peter Blake hoped to make an Alice museum when he moved to a little village just outside Bath. Jann Haworth opened a small school in the village and named it the "Looking-Glass School". If you dropped in the school you might have enjoyed the "lessens" in "Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils". Unfortunately the school has been closed, according to Brian Partridge, as the children were all grownup and "back through the glass into our real world".

It was a small school in a converted barn and the dozen children were from the village. This was allowed by the government when the children were young, but when they reached eleven, they had to go to a "proper" school. So the children grew up and moved away, and there were fewer and fewer little children left until it had to close.

Brian Partridge, the illustrator of *The Honeycomb* (a poetical work by Pauline Stainer) and Friend of Ruralists tells us in a personal letter that the Ruralists' "Alice" began life as a small exhibition, but like Alice who had taken the content of a small bottle in the Rabbit's house, it grew and grew. Among the contributors are the Friends of Ruralists like Brian Partridge, Sue Cave, Joseph Hewes, Diana Howard, John Morley, and fifteen Associates including Gilbert Adams, Brian Froud, Val Archer. Over

seventy paintings, drawings and even a hand-quilted wall hanging taken from the stencils of Wonderland illustrator, John Tenniel were exhibited. Each depicted the artists' own interpretation of Alice and her adventures in Wonderland by using lines from the original text: e.g. *"If you are going to turn into a pig my dear..."*, *"Into the loveliest garden you ever saw"*, *"Who cares for you, you are nothing but a pack of cards"*, *"This must be the wood where things have no name."* etc.

Once a year the Ruralists take a working holiday together at Coombe, in Cornwall. There is no particular common style among the Ruralists. But they share the feelings that they are nourished by the beauty of nature. Ann Arnold writes in her letter dated August 15th 1991 that the land they came for is a great and constant inspiration for their paintings and their paintings are statements of HOPE and the GLORY of this earth. They wish to communicate their positive feelings to others. She describes the essence of their feelings as a Reverence. It is conviction that Nature is Sacred and their art grows from this conviction.

When we talk of Alice we must remember the varieties of Alice. Alice Liddell who had inspire Carroll and made him create the stories for her, and the heroine Alice of "Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass". Both of them inspire the artists to create still new Alices. The deliberate lack of any physical description of the real Alice in the text, has regularly offered an irresistible challenge to artists ever since to produce their own vision of the heroine.

The majority of publishers seem to have been content to reprint Tenniel's illustrations, and Alice is popularly remembered with his drawings. However, since the British copyright expired in 1907 so many artists have created their own special and unique personalised view of Alice.

Among them are Arthur Rackham (1907), Bessie Pease Gutman (1908), Harry Furniss (1909), Willy Pogany (1929), Mervyn Peake (1946), Philip Gough (1949), Ralph Steadman (1967), Salvador Dali (1969), to name them just a few. Now the Ruralists' images of Alice may be included in the latest examples, and they look upon her as a timeless dream child.

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