

A spot of sightseeing: When Lewis Carroll visited Brussels 150 years ago



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The celebrated author only left the UK once in his lifetime - and the first stop in his European travels was Brussels

When shy Oxford mathematician Charles Dodgson arrived at Gare des Bogards in the afternoon of 13 July 1867, he was quite pleased with himself. Indeed, he had never travelled beyond the borders of Great Britain before. Instead, he was a man whose adventures had taken place exclusively in books. And what adventures they were - for hidden behind the stern facade and the stammer was Lewis Carroll, the whimsical author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Born on 27 January 1832, in the small parsonage of Daresbury (Cheshire), Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was destined to forge an academic and religious career, just like his father before him. Yet, by the age of 35, he would write what was to become a classic of children's literature

Their first stop on the (now BELVue Museum) next to the Royal Palace, as recommended in Bradshaw's *Continental Railway Guide*, the Victorian era equivalent of *A Rough Guide to Europe*. After a light dinner - "only seven services", Dodgson noted with irony - our two companions went to the Park of Brussels, where the Royal Orchestra of La Monnaie were offering their summer programme in the (now defunct) Park's Quinconce. They listened to some polkas, polonaises, and waltzes "with hundreds of people sitting at little tables among the trees, the whole place lit up with lamps," Dodgson wrote. Both men enjoyed the concert and the magical atmosphere of their evening out.

'Terribly theatrical'

In the morning of 14 July, Dodgson and Liddon went to the English service in St. Jacques-on-Coudenberg where Liddon said the office. Both of them were clergymen, as per tradition and rule at the University of Oxford at the time; it was not surprising then that they should want to attend the High Mass in Saints Michael and Gudula later that day as well.

Though Dodgson did not like it much, he observed, as always, the comical traits of his contemporaries and described the whole ceremony in his journal with the same tone he used to describe a certain croquet ground where the mallets and balls were live flamingos and hedgehogs: "[T]here were generally two things going on at once: the choir were generally singing anthems, while the priest went on, quite independently, with his part of the service - and the whole body of priests were continually going up in little processions, kneeling for about a second before the altar [...] and returning to their places," he wrote.

He did like the picturesque effect of the whole event, but what truly caught his attention was the curious ceremony that followed, which Liddon erroneously called "the Fête du Miracle du St. Sacrament," but which was in fact the Sacrement de Miracle (and not the other way round). The ceremony commemorated the miraculous return in 1370 of hosts that had allegedly been stolen by a group of Jewish people (whom the good people of Brussels then proceeded to burn on a stake).

Dodgson noted that the procession of the host through the town was very colourful, with wreaths of paper flowers, banners, and confetti. He particularly liked the splendid dresses of everyone involved and wrote that it was "far the most splendid ceremonial" he had ever seen. But his Anglican simplicity was challenged by the opulence of the ceremony, and he regarded it as "terribly theatrical and unreal."

Appreciating the Grand Place

the City Hall.

They left Brussels for Cologne the next morning and went on to Russia via Germany, then back to England via Paris. Dodgson would never return to Brussels, nor would he leave Great Britain again, but he would go on writing a sequel to *Alice's Adventures: Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, as well as other children's books (*Sylvie and Bruno*) and mathematical treatises. Dodgson and Liddon remained friends until Liddon's death in 1890. Dodgson passed away on the 14 January 1898, a couple of days before his 66th birthday.

Needless to say Brussels has changed considerably in 150 years. Its population has more than doubled. Entire streets have disappeared, and others have sprung from their ashes. But the Royal Square and the Park have barely been altered, so should you happen to be in the neighbourhood on a fine summer evening, just like Henry Liddon and Charles Dodgson, you may find something in the air that will take you back to 1867.

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