



Classics in Short No.78: Nonsense Songs and Stories and Nonsense Botany and Nonsense Alphabets

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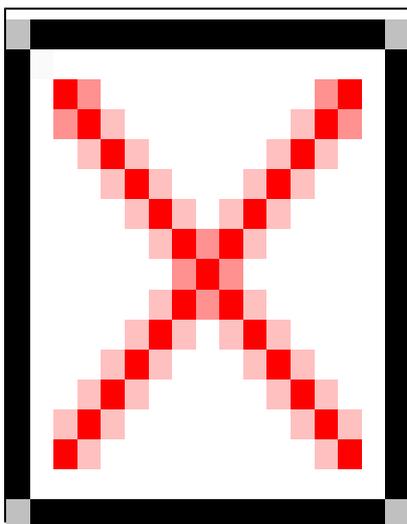
Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on Edward Lear's **Nonsense Songs and Stories** and **Nonsense Botany and Nonsense Alphabets**.

Brian Alderson

Single-poet collections? How about single-genius?



For many readers

a ?single-poet collection? (see pps 8-9 in this issue of **BfK**) and Edward Lear will probably mean **The Complete Nonsense** which was edited by Holbrook Jackson. First published in 1947, fifty-nine years after the poet's death, it has remained in print in one form or another ever since.

Even in 1947 however,

?complete? was a misnomer, as was the concept ?single-poet collection?. For, from his early teenage years (he was born in 1822), Lear showed a natural gift for comic balladry which he deployed not, as today, in the composition of regular collections to keep the royalties flowing in but as multifarious occasional offerings for friends or for more casual acquaintances just for the fun of the thing.

The extent of these offerings

may be judged from the 458 pages that make up the substance of the magnificent **Complete Verse** edited by Vivien Noakes which Penguin put out as a hardback in 2001, with an inferior, hacked-down paperback following a year later. The volume is organised chronologically, taking in much prose and verse that had never been published before, or had been published only obscurely, with notes identifying dates of composition and, where known, the lucky recipients.

Thus 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat', the first of the nonsense songs to be published – surprisingly, in an American children's magazine – was written for the young daughter of the poet John Addington Symonds, while many comic alphabets have turned up in manuscripts done to amuse a particular child. (We do not know if Lear had a government licence to do this.)

Not that Lear was averse to publication.

During his lifetime four little collections for children came out, the first being the famous limericks in **A Book of Nonsense** (1846) which he lithographed himself. Later on though, owing to work on one of his travel books, he became involved with a shady bookseller-publisher, Robert J Bush, through whom he published the three further books on which his fame as a poet largely rests. It was neither an easy nor a profitable relationship ('he makes me foam at the mouth' says Lear in a letter) and although the books met with a warm welcome, Bush did not have the wit or the capacity to make anything of them – eventually going bankrupt and losing all Lear's illustrative wood-blocks in the process.

The author's frequent absences

from England were in part to blame. For it must be remembered in the first place that his fragile health required him to work as far away from the English winter as he could get, and in the second that his profession was not primarily that of a writer but of what he was pleased to call 'a nartist' or, echoing a description he once heard of himself: 'a dirty landscape painter'. Hence his attention was always on travel and on the making and selling of his work. (He was, in fact, a fine practitioner, especially skilled in lithography, and those who think, on the evidence of his nonsense pictures, that he could not draw fail to recognize that these seemingly dashed-off and rudimentary sketches are precisely what the work demands. Barring Edward Gorey and John Vernon Lord there is hardly a single modern illustrator who measures up to the sensitive job of illustrating his verses – especially amongst the crew of gaudy colourists who think that the Nonsense Songs are matter for overdone picture books.)

For the Songs

are the high point of Lear's artistry. Illustrating them is of no consequence because what is essential to them is first the music of their verse, which pictures only interrupt, and second the emotion that is veiled by the so-called nonsense. The word may certainly be used of the sometimes tiresome alphabets, or the mad adventure stories, or the brilliant send-ups of textbook botany and gastronomy. (My own attempt to make Amblongus Pie resulted in the death of a passing labrador when I threw it out of the window.) But from 'The Duck and the Kangaroo' – a song which probably preceded 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat' – to the black humour of the second Discobolos ballad and the sad strains of 'Uncle Arly' – both of which were published posthumously in 1894 – the Songs employ nonsense in counterpoint to a sovereign melancholy. Sometimes it is explicit, sometimes, as in say 'The Jumblies' or 'The Quangle Wangle's Hat', it is present in the very assertion of happiness.

This ambiguity

stands in marked contrast to the nonsense of Lear's frequently cited companion in the genre: Charles Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll (strangely neither anywhere acknowledges the existence of the other). Each is unique in the annals of children's literature – and often regarded in foreign parts as a uniquely English phenomenon ('trop spécifiquement britanniques?', 'Englische Nonsense-Literatur?') – but where Carroll stands outside his absurdities, observing and recording the inscrutable ways of white rabbits and snarks, Lear is a presence within his own texts. He is the victim belaboured by the 'they' who inhabit the limericks; he is the rejected Mr Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò or the Dong, and, as many an equivalent instance, he subsists within those creatures on the great Gromboolian Plain where, defeated by the cussedness of things, they must needs

?... play for evermore

at battlecock and shuttledore?.

The British Library have just published excellent facsimiles of the two 'trade' volumes, first published by Frederick Warne, which led to the wide appreciation of Lear's work: the **Nonsense Songs and Stories** of 1888 (978 0 7123 5043 3, £14.95) and **Nonsense Botany and Nonsense Alphabets** of 1889 (978 0 7123 5044 0, £14.95) from which our illustrations are taken. Welcome as these are as representations of their period a choice of the 1894 edition of the former title would have been more fitting as a 'single-author collection' since it more fully rounds out Lear's balladry.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His edition of Lear for young readers, **A Book of Bosh**, was first published as a Puffin Book in 1975.



[Nonsense Cover.jpg](#) [3]



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Nonsense Songs and Stories and Nonsense Botany and Nonsense Alphabets of 1889 from which our illustrations are taken

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