

Obituary prepared for *The Lobster's Voice*, Newsletter of the Lewis Carroll Society of Australia (LCSA). January, 2003. A contracted version was published in *The Lobster's Voice*, December, 2002. Volume 5, Issue 2, pp.4-6.

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## **PETER LAUCLAN HEATH**

**9 May 1922 - 4 August 2002**

Carrollians will remember the page of *The Lobster's Voice* (July 2002, Volume 5, Issue 1, p.11) containing the parody of "The Aged Aged Man" by Peter Heath, in honour of Morton N. Cohen. Peter passed away in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he spent his northern summers away from his home in Charlottesville, Va. soon after its appearance. I write this obituary as his friend since 1988 at the request of our LCSA convener and Editor of "The Lobster's Voice", Deborah Caputo, emphasizing Peter's activities as a Carrollian.

Peter was born in Milan, Italy, and remained close to his fraternal-twin brother John, who, with his family was present, as I was, and spoke at the memorial service for Peter at the University Chapel, University of Virginia (UVa), on Thursday September 26th, 2002. It rained heavily all day; a romantic might have said: "The heavens wept." John eventually followed a diplomatic career, while Peter became an academic. Their ancestry was English, Scottish (connections with the Sinclair - or St Clair - family), French, Russian (an Odessa connection), and possibly German. Peter never married, but enjoyed his role as uncle.

The "Alice" connection was, one might say, portended. Peter, speaking on December 2nd 1998 to the History and Philosophy of Science Seminar at UVa on the topic "T.H. Huxley: The man who torpedoed Noah's Ark" says that he lived for most of his first 25 years at St.John's Wood in London, where the Huxleys had lived 50 years before him next to the Presbyterian Church to which Peter's Scottish nanny used to take him around 1928. Huxley's wife and daughters had gone on Sundays to St Mark's Anglican Church, which "...was then under the incumbency of the Rev. Robinson Duckworth...who on July 4th, 1862,...had been the only adult auditor to the first telling of *Alice in Wonderland*. He had rowed stroke to Dodgson's (LC's) bow, on the famous boat-trip at Oxford with the three small daughters of the Dean of Christ Church, and the tale was improvised, to his astonishment, over his shoulder." Later, in Charlottesville, which has historically a very strong Presbyterian presence, he was invited by neighbours to attend church on Sundays, as is still a strong Southern tradition in the U.S.; but he declined on the grounds that as a philosopher he had to maintain his impartiality.

Peter was educated at Shrewsbury and awarded a scholarship in German at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was eventually awarded a First Class Honours degree in Modern Greats. The study at Oxford was compressed due to the onset of World War 2, as was his officer training at Sandhurst. Peter and John served together for 15 months as officers on the Staff of the British Armoured 11th Division. Peter, speaking good German was (as lieutenant at age 22) divisional intelligence officer. John recalled at the memorial service: "Peter's finest hour came in a field outside Lubeck on the Baltic on 5 May 1945, when he was to be seen interrogating no less than 17 German generals...". This was followed by some startling contact at Flensburg with Hitler's successor Admiral Doenitz, with Field Marshal Keitel, Jodl, Speer,.... The story is told with his usual flair in : Peter Heath *The Last Hours of the OKW*, as an appendix to the book of the Division's OC, Major-General G.P.B. Roberts (1987) *From the Desert to the Baltic*, and completely at [www.net-bog-klubben.dk/98130.pdf](http://www.net-bog-klubben.dk/98130.pdf) .

After the war which he finished as Captain, Peter taught Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh (1946-1958), where he was a colleague of John Huntly Bishop (who became Professor of Classics 1959-1981 at our Australian University of New England (UNE)). Peter visited the UVa in 1959, and taught Logic and Metaphysics at the University of St. Andrews (1959-1962) before coming to UVa permanently in 1962. He retired in 1995. An Australian presence was already established through a visit (June to August) to the University of Western Australia in 1980, and a sparkling after-dinner speech ("How many angels can dance on the end of a pin?", a question earlier asked by St. Thomas Aquinas) in the same year, on the

occasion of John Huntly Bishop's retirement at the UNE. The speech may be found in the book *Vindex Humanitatis* (1980) (Ed. Bruce Marshall) published by UNE on the occasion. Peter often referred to Aquinas with respect in his writings. Coincidentally, there is a large metallic statue of Aquinas outside the Catholic university church of the same name in Charlottesville. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), to the translation and editing of whose writings Peter devoted much of the later years of his life, is buried in a ruined Gothic cathedral in Königsberg (now called Kaliningrad, in Russia).

I first met Peter during an academic year (1988-89) that I spent as Visiting Professor of Mathematics at UVa where he was Professor of Philosophy, after I was told he was an eminent Carrollian by a member of the Lewis Carroll Society of North America (LCSNA), Fran Abeles, who shared with me an interest in the mathematics of Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, 1832-1898). My own interest stemmed from 1983, especially in the probability problems within Carroll's *Pillow Problems*; I had spent some of my own sleepless periods working through them. The author of *A Philosopher's Alice* (1974) - he was fond of saying it was the only book he had authored - and I quickly discovered rapport and met for regular lunches. During that visit to UVa I gave a talk on LC which he attended, and he was both pleased and embarrassed when I singled him out in the audience. We travelled together in his car to a meeting of the LCSNA in Winston-Salem, NC, May 5-7, 1989, a memorable occasion (*Alice in Carroll-ina*) at which Elizabeth Sewell spoke. During the evening conference-dinner, Winston-Salem was hit by a storm which uprooted many trees and thus caused loss of power in our motel for both nights. I remember a visit to Lovett and Lovett booksellers, and the presence of other eminent Carrollians, not including, alas, Martin Gardner. Peter and I kept in touch by mail until I came back to UVa for the Fall Semesters (Sept.-Dec.) of 1999 and 2001, when we resumed our long weekend lunches, at which I learned much in the most agreeable way about things such as political history, dialectical materialism and Kant's antinomies. I needed this for my talk: "Statistical Regularity and Free Will" to come on Friday 30 November 2001. At our lunch the next day, the last time I saw him, he graciously allowed: "You didn't do too much damage to Kant."

The photograph where Peter is shown with spectacles and white shirt accompanying the published version of this obituary was taken at a lunch in September, 2001; it is probably the last photo of him. Our September meetings in that year were less cheerful: we shared the anxiety and disbelief of the country over 9/11.

Peter's neatly and densely written letters and postcards during my interim absences from UVa are a delight: he had, always, a rare lightness of style in his writing, combined with wit and profound erudition, deep historical knowledge and a sharp perception of the ways of the world. One, from Edinburgh dated August 4, 1998, has a colourful new "Alice" postage stamp - clearly specially chosen - for 63p of a scene from *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. In another letter he brought up again Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding*, of which he thought highly as a kind of Australian children's-literature counterpart of the *Alice* books, while still unable to decide whether there was a Carroll influence on Lindsay.

My experience of Peter as Carrollian was much amplified by the presentation at Peter's memorial service by August Imholtz of the LCSNA. Peter had been one of the earliest members after the Society was formed in 1974 at Princeton, NJ. In 1977-80 he served as editor of its newsletter, *The Knight Letter*. He was vice-president in 1975-1976, president 1977-80. August Imholtz recalls Peter's "...animated talk on the vexing problem of the paternity of the pig baby, whom Alice rescued from the Duchess's kitchen..." I had told Peter once that Deborah Caputo had included "pigbaby" in her email address, which information he greeted with approval. It was largely due to Peter that the UVa Press was selected to publish the scholarly volumes of *The Pamphlets of Lewis Carroll*. Fran Abeles, the compiler, editor and commentator asked me to edit the probability contributions within Volume 2 (*The Mathematical Pamphlets*, 1994).

Peter had an enormous collection of Carrolliana (and more generally Victoriana) in his home in Charlottesville. He took delight in telling me in a letter dated Jan. 12, 2001, how with the help of John he had acquired by auction in London last summer, under the noses of the London booksellers, the collection of a deceased Carrollian, and had been cataloguing it ever since. There were treasures there which he had sought for 30 years, and some of whose existence he did not even know, as well as the expected duplicates

of his own holdings. I encouraged him to make provision for his own collection in the event of his own decease, but (although he expressed some views to me) I don't think he ever did.

Among his own writings were several entries in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Ed. P. Edwards) (1967), including Lewis Carroll, George Boole (1815 - 1864) and Augustus De Morgan (1806-1871), inasmuch as these were all logicians as well as mathematicians. Dodgson had learned his probability partly from De Morgan's (1838) *Essay on Probabilities*. Peter had written on De Morgan's philosophical aspects, specifically an introduction to an edition of *On the Syllogism*. But De Morgan had great flair also for mathematical problems of "popular" kind, tackled by "amateur" mathematicians: one has only to look at the two volumes of his *Budget of Paradoxes*, edited posthumously by his wife Sophia in 1872 (1st edition). Imholtz says, as Peter used to say, that DeMorgan "...bequeathed to Carroll the mantle of refuting the circle squarers." Boole, in a sense a protege of De Morgan, like him interalia worked on probability, and it was a delight for me when Peter agreed to coauthor with me an entry on Boole for *Statisticians of the Centuries* (2001). The entry on DeMorgan was authored by a young Englishman, Adrian Rice, who joined me and Karen and Brian Parshall, as Virginia friends of mathematical-historical orientation, of Peter. It was Peter's occasional view, expressed in his understated way, that someone should do a thorough study of De Morgan's probability, and Adrian and I have now undertaken this as a tribute to his memory.

Another entry (pp. 524 - 5) by Peter in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, on "Nothing", has now achieved legendary status. As I recall from our conversations, it needed to be written at very short notice to fill space left vacant through the tardiness of some contributor. Peter treated it initially tongue-in-cheek, and it will appeal to Carrollians. It begins with:

NOTHING is an awe-inspiring yet essentially undigested concept, highly esteemed by writers of mystical or existentialist tendency, but by most others regarded with anxiety, nausea or panic. Nobody knows how to deal with it (he would, of course) and plain persons generally are reported to have little difficulty in saying, seeing, hearing and doing nothing. Philosophers, however, have never felt easy on the matter...

It displays Peter's usual unique blend of wit and elegant style, and later, becomes technical at the same time. Some readers may recall that LC grappled at length with the related mathematical concept of the infinitesimal. The above passage is also apposite to Peter's commentary on the disappearance of the Cheshire Cat, its disappearance according to LC: "...ending with a grin which remained some time after the rest of it had gone." Peter writes in *The Philosopher's Alice* (p 65) in characteristic style and with nodding acquaintance with imaginary numbers in mathematics:

This is an outrageous defiance of the long-established tradition that an attribute must inhere in a substance ... a grin is not part of anything, being merely, as Alice recognizes, a contingent feature or aspect of cats ... smells and sounds ... and star images ... have been regarded by some as substances in their own right. Not so grins, which as mere facial contortions would seem to be no less functionally dependent on faces than the square root of -1 is functionally dependent on -1, and about as likely to be seen in public.

A late Carrollianism, "Introduction to *La Guida di Bragia*," displays again how Peter managed to make out of a hobby a scholarly pursuit. The *Knight Letter* of the LCSNA, Number 61, Fall 1999, published *La Guida di Bragia*, A Ballad Opera for the Marionette Theatre, a railway saga set in England, written by the teenaged Charles Dodgson as a family entertainment. Peter's introduction occupies pp.2-4. The Italianate title, Peter writes (p.3) "... is a pseudo-operatic rendering of the famous railway guide published by George Bradshaw from 1841 onwards, and generally known simply as 'Bradshaw'..." He discusses the young LC's affinity and proximity to railways, the history of the manuscript and of the marionette theatre that he himself built, the performance history of the play, and the classical allusions: for example:

The unlikely choice of "Sophonisba" for the heroine can only have come from the tragedy of that name, published by James Thomson in 1730. She was the daughter of Hasdrubal, the Carthaginian

general, had a blighted love-affair with the Nubian prince, Masinissa, who was on the Roman side, and took poison as tragic heroines are prone to do. Thomson's play is remembered only for its famously awful line: "Oh! Sophonisba, Sophonisba, Oh!"

Late in this piece, Peter reveals one way in which LC's work appealed to him: "The basic absurdity of official behaviour, its ritual adherence to protocol and regulation in defiance of commonsense, is a favourite target of Dodgson's satire, not only in the early writings, but above all in the two *Alices* - ..."

A fitting way to conclude this obituary is the politely and philosophically irreverent last verse of a poem Peter wrote on the occasion of his and John's joint 80th birthday (the title is: *Admonition for an Anniversary*, and the topic is the soundness of their arteries):

So keep them going till the day  
Imprinted in our DNA  
When sounds at last the terminal knell  
And off we go to Heaven or Hell  
To sing with loud angelic squawks  
Or dance around with toasting forks;  
Though which is found from which dominion  
May be a matter of opinion.

**Eugene Seneta.**

### **Postscript (August, 2014)**

1. The tribute dedicated to Peter's memory was published as:

[Rice A., Seneta E. De Morgan in the prehistory of statistical hypothesis testing](#), *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series A. Statistics in Society*, **168** (2005), Part 3, 615–627.

2. Peter's contribution on *La Guida di Bragia* is online at

<http://www.archive.org/knightletterno6100lewi> .

3. Douglas Rogers writes: "if you do put your obituary notice online, you might perhaps bring it more up-to-date for your readers with a reference to Richard Foulkes' book, as well as noting PLH's [now digitized] contribution to Knight Letter..."

Richard Foulkes: *Lewis Carroll and the Victorian stage: theatricals in a quiet life* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2005) 224pp [www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754604662](http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754604662).

4. [Seneta E. Victorian probability and Lewis Carroll](#), *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A. Statistics in Society*, **175** (2012), Part 2, 435–451.