

On writing a biography of C. S. Lewis

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It is a great pleasure to be able to speak to you on one of Oxford's best-known and widely-read literary figures. Let me begin by asking the obvious question. Why yet another biography of C. S. Lewis? Lewis has been the subject of several major biographies since his death, of which the two most important are by his friend George Sayer (1988) and his critic A. N. Wilson (1990). Sayer writes as one who knew Lewis, and helps us understand Lewis as a person. Wilson is more critical of Lewis, while showing a good knowledge of his works and ideas. Why a new biography? It's a perfectly fair question.

When I began to plan this biography in the late autumn of 2008, three factors seemed to me to point to the need for a new study. First, 2013 marked the 50th anniversary of Lewis's death, and this seemed an obvious date for the publication of a new assessment of his life and significance. Second, I had myself been reading Lewis since 1974. By 2008, I was fairly sure that I had noticed some things that others had missed, simply because of my professional background. As some of you will know, I specialize in intellectual and religious history, with a particular interest in the early modern period. And third, my reading of the main Lewis biographies published up to that date seemed to miss out on some things (such as the significance of his Irish roots) or get some things muddled (such as some aspects of Oxford academic culture in the period between the two wars).

Once more, I felt reasonably well placed to deal with these matters. Like Lewis, I was born in Belfast, and grew up there. Like Lewis, I went to Oxford as an undergraduate, and eventually ended up an Oxford don. I was Oxford's professor

of historical theology before moving to King's College London. Both Lewis and I were atheists in our youth, and discovered Christianity while at Oxford. So I felt that I might be able to help tease out some aspects of Lewis's development which others might find somewhat opaque.

So who was I writing for? I made an early decision that I would aim for an audience who had encountered Lewis's name through Narnia – either the books themselves, or the movies. My primary aim was to tell the story of the man who invented Narnia, and help his readers get more out of their reading of the Narnia series. This had one major consequence, which marks this biography off from others. Sayer and Wilson give a continuous account of Lewis's career, which means that the conceptual development and writing of Narnia has to be treated as a part of Lewis's overall development, spread over about ten years.

I made the decision to organize the biography around the physical and imaginative worlds that Lewis inhabited – Oxford, Narnia, and Cambridge – and was able to configure the narrative in such a way that the origins, writing, and significance of Narnia can be treated as a single section of the book. But I will say more about this later in this talk.

So how did I go about writing this? The first thing to be done was to read everything that Lewis published in chronological order. In 2006, the third and final volume of Lewis's letters was published, edited by Walter Hooper – incidentally, a major work of scholarship in its own right. These letters played a very important role in this biography, providing its narrative backbone. Why did I read Lewis like this? Mainly, because I wanted to get a sense of the development of his ideas, and the emergence of his writing style. I also hoped to identify some good quotes that I would be able to insert into the text. It took fifteen months.

I then worked through the secondary literature concerning Lewis and his circle. Much of this I already knew, of course, but I felt it was important to read it again in the light of my own detailed engagement with Lewis. Finally, I began to work in archives – mostly in Cambridge, Oxford, and London – to clarify points about Lewis’s career. Then, I began to write. My first draft of the introduction was written in April 2011, and the final version of the text agreed in discussion with my editor in March 2012.

Now I have to admit that I did not expect my research to turn up anything dramatic – I think I was anticipating more of a clarification of his development, or achieving increased precision in our understanding of his ideas. And certainly, I found such things. Let me give you one example. On 26 September 1917, Lewis was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Somerset Light Infantry. After training, he was sent to fight in the trenches in north-western France. Most biographers treat this posting as unproblematic. But why did Lewis join the Somerset Light Infantry? He had no connection with Somerset. He could easily have joined an Irish regiment, or the local Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

While in training as an officer cadet in Oxford in the summer of 1917, Lewis formed a deep attachment to a young man of his own age, Paddy Moore, as well as his divorced mother and daughter. There is no doubt that Lewis came to see the Moores as his adopted family, especially since the death of his mother back in 1908 deprived him of any maternal care. Might that have shaped his choice of regiment? But Moore was commissioned in the Rifle Brigade, and died in the spring of 1918 on the Somme. I found Lewis’s choice of regiment baffling. Until, that is, I found an entry in a yellowing foolscap document, held in an Oxford archive, which mentions Paddy Moore – and reveals that his sponsoring regiment was the Somerset Light Infantry.

But the big discovery I made concerned the redating of Lewis's conversion – that is, the date when he moved away from his youthful atheism, and began to believe in God. In a later development, possibly two years later, he moved from a mere belief in God to a fuller commitment to Christianity. In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* (1955), Lewis tells his readers that he finally abandoned his resistance to an approaching God, becoming the “most dejected and reluctant convert in all England” in the Trinity Term of 1929 – that is, to the eight weeks from late April and to late June 1929.

But as I read his writings from 1929, I sensed no change in his voice or tone. There was no indication of any kind of such a radical realignment. If Lewis did indeed come to believe in God in Trinity Term 1929, it appears to have made no discernible difference to his outlook or thought. But his writings of the second half of 1930 had a different “feel”. I know it sounds terribly subjective, but it seemed to me that there was an aura of grace present, where it had not been before. But how could I trust such a subjective judgement? Surely we ought to trust Lewis's own recollections of this pivotal event?

The only thing I could do was to check things out rigorously. One of the things about being an intellectual historian is that you know what to look for when tracking the development of someone's ideas! After detailed analysis, I came to the conclusion that there are four good reasons for challenging Lewis's recollection that this is to be dated to Trinity Term 1929.

First, as I have just indicated a close and continuous reading of his works – especially his correspondence – reveals no sign of a significant change in tone or mood throughout 1929, and even in early 1930. Between September 1925 and January 1930, Lewis's writings disclose no hint of any radical change of heart or mind, or even a pending change. If Lewis was converted in 1929, this supposedly

pivotal event seems to have made no impact on his writings – including his letters to his closest friends at that time, Owen Barfield and Arthur Greeves.

Second, Lewis's widowed father died in September 1929. If Lewis's chronology of his own conversion is accepted, Lewis had come to believe in God at the time of his father's death. Yet Lewis's correspondence makes no reference at all to any impact of a belief in God, however emergent, upon his final days spent with his father, his subsequent funeral, and its emotional aftermath. Might, I wondered, the death of Lewis's faith have been a stimulus to him to think about God, rather than something he approached from an existing theistic perspective? If Lewis discovered God in the summer of 1930, his father's death the previous year might well have marked a turning point in his thinking.

Third, Lewis's account of the dynamics of his conversion in *Surprised by Joy* speaks of God closing in on him, taking the initiative, and ultimately overwhelming him. We find echoes of this language in a short letter from Lewis to Owen Barfield, written hastily on 3 February 1930, which speaks of the "spirit" becoming "much more personal," "taking the offensive" and "behaving just like God." Lewis asked Barfield to come and see him soon, before he made a rash decision to "enter a monastery." Barfield was later unequivocal about the significance of this letter for Lewis's spiritual development: it marked "the beginning of his conversion". The letter reflects Lewis's language about the pressures he experienced immediately before his conversion. Yet this conversion is clearly *ahead* of him, not *behind* him.

Fourth, Lewis makes it clear that his behaviour changed as a result of his new belief in God. Although still not committed to Christianity, he now began to attend both his local parish church on Sundays, and college chapel on weekdays. Yet Lewis's correspondence makes no reference to regular attendance at any Oxford church or Magdalen College chapel in 1929, or the first half of 1930.

Yet things change decisively in October 1930. In a letter to his close friend and confidant Arthur Greeves, dated 29 October 1930, Lewis mentions that he now goes to bed earlier than he used, to, as he has now “started going to morning chapel at 8”. This is presented as a *new development*, a significant change in his routine, dating from the beginning of the academic year 1930-1. The date of this change of habit makes sense if Lewis discovered God in the summer of 1930 – perhaps in June 1930, right at the end of the academic year. This would explain Lewis starting to attend college chapel in October 1930. The Oxford academic year resumes in October, thus giving Lewis the opportunity to begin attending college chapel regularly.

The traditional date of Lewis’s conversion, based on his own narrative in *Surprised by Joy*, and repeated in every major study of Lewis to date, clearly needs review. Let me emphasise that the only reason for believing that Lewis was converted in the Trinity Term of 1929 is that one passage in this book – a book which is known to contain a number of misdatings. The best explanation of things is that Lewis’s subjective location of the event in his inner world should be regarded as reliable, but that his chronological location of the event in terms of his outer world is misplaced. If Lewis was converted during any Trinity Term, it was the Trinity Term of 1930, not 1929 – namely, at some point between 27 April and 21 June 1930. My own hunch is that the conversion took place towards the end of this term, possibly in mid-June.

This clearly raises the question of the reliability of Lewis’s memory. How could he misremember such an important date in his life? If this was the tipping-point in Lewis’s life, surely he would remember it in detail? The answer seems reasonably clear. Lewis may have been terrible about remembering dates; however, he retained a vivid memory of his thoughts and feelings at that time. Subjectively, Lewis gives us a superb account of his thoughts, longings, and concerns, leading

up to his conversion. But he is unreliable when it comes to relating his internal and external world. When it comes to dates, months, and days, Lewis gets things muddled.

Lewis himself remarked on this failing in 1957, shortly after the publication of *Surprised by Joy*: he could now, he confessed, “never remember dates”. His older brother Warnie declared that Lewis had a “life-long inability to keep track of dates”. When Lewis became Vice-President of Magdalen College, Oxford in 1941 – a fixed-term appointment with essentially administrative responsibilities, which rotated around the fellowship – he was soon found to be incapable of carrying out one of the chief responsibilities of this role: arranging for the booking of rooms for college meetings or private engagements. Lewis simply could not remember dates. Rooms were double-booked – if they were booked at all.

So did Lewis just misremember this date? After all, *Surprised by Joy* was written twenty years after the event. Perhaps. After all, Lewis gets quite a few dates wrong in this work – such as the date of his first reading of George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. Yet as I read *Surprised by Joy* more closely, especially in the light of possible influences from the late classical period (such as Augustine of Hippo) and the Middle Ages (such as Dante), I began to realize there was more going on. Lewis clearly regarded writing his autobiography, not simply as conveying information about himself, but discerning structure in his life. Like Augustine’s *Confessions*, it was a narrated account of prevenient grace – the moments when Lewis, like Augustine, realized he was being redirected; that seeds were being planted; that his eyes were being opened. The simple reality is that, after his conversion, dates didn’t really matter all that much to Lewis. *Surprised by Joy* is a narrative of an unexpected and transformative encounter between God and an awakening soul. For Lewis, the really important thing was that God encountered

him in the world of time and space – not the precise moment at which this happened.

Now clearly this redating of Lewis's conversion is something that Lewis scholars will want to debate, and it is probably the most important contribution the biography makes to Lewis scholarship. I think I'm right, and gladly hand the discussion over to others to weigh the evidence, and come to their own conclusions. However, many of you here this afternoon will rightly wonder how important this is. So what if Lewis converted a year later? That's not why people read him! And you would be right. Although this biography clarifies a lot about Lewis, its main function is to help its readers understand more about the man who wrote Narnia, and enable them to get more out of their reading of his works.

So let's talk about Narnia. I think we can track this project back to 1939, when Lewis began to float the idea of writing children's stories. With the outbreak of the war in September 1939, some children were evacuated from London, and lived with Lewis and his family in his Oxford home, The Kilns. My personal view is that *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is the best of the series; that it ought to be read first, even before *The Magician's Nephew*; and that it can stand alone. As we read this remarkable work, we find echoes of the books that Lewis read as a child – in my view, especially some works of E. Nesbit, and *The Wind in the Willows*.

So why does Narnia have such a deep appeal? I think that we cannot hope to understand the deep appeal of Narnia without appreciating the place of stories in shaping our understanding of reality, and our own place within it. The Chronicles of Narnia resonate strongly with the basic human intuition that our own story is part of something grander—which, once grasped, allows us to see our situation in a new and more meaningful way. A veil is lifted; a door is opened; a curtain is drawn aside—and we are enabled to enter a new realm. Our own story is now

seen to be part of a much bigger story, which both helps us understand how we fit into a greater scheme of things, and discover and value the difference we can make.

Like his Oxford friend JRR Tolkien, Lewis was deeply aware of the imaginative power of “myths”—stories that tried to make sense of who we are, where we find ourselves, what has gone wrong with things, and what can be done about it. A “myth”, as Lewis uses the term, is not a false story told to deceive, but a story that on the one hand resonates with the deepest structures of reality, and on the other has an ability to connect up with the human imagination. Tolkien was able to use myth to saturate *The Lord of the Rings* with a mysterious “otherness,” a sense of mystery and magic which hints at a reality beyond that which human reason can fathom. One of the points that I make in this biography, by the way, is that Lewis was midwife to *The Lord of the Rings*). Lewis realized that good and evil, danger, anguish and joy can all be seen more clearly when “dipped in myth.” Through their “presentational realism,” these narratives provided a way of grasping the deeper structures of our world at both the imaginative and rational levels.

Lewis may also have come to realize the power of myth through reading G. K. Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*, with its classic distinction between “imaginary” and “imaginative,” and deft analysis of how the imagination reaches beyond the limits of reason. “Every true artist,” Chesterton argued, feels “that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil.”

Steeped in the riches of medieval and Renaissance literature, and with a deep understanding of how “myths” work, Lewis managed to find the right voice and the right words to get past the suspicions of a “fully waking imagination of a logical mind.” Somehow, Narnia seems to provide a deeper, brighter, more

wonderful, and more meaningful world than anything we know from our own experience. Though its readers all know that the Chronicles of Narnia are fictional, they nevertheless seem far more “true to life” than many supposedly factual works.

Lewis always recognized that the same story might be a “myth” to one reader, and not to another. The stories of Narnia seem childish nonsense to some. But to others, they are utterly transformative. For those, these evocative stories affirm that it is possible for the weak and foolish to have a noble calling in a dark world; that our deepest intuitions point us to the true meaning of things; that there is indeed something beautiful and wonderful at the heart of the universe, and that this may be found, embraced, and adored.

Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is about finding a master ring, that rules the other rings—and then destroying it, because it turns out to be so dangerous and destructive. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia are about finding a master story, that makes sense of all other stories—and then embracing it, because of its power to give meaning and value to life. But which is the true story? Which are merely its shadows and echoes? And which are fabrications, tales spun to entrap and deceive?

At an early stage in the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the four children begin to hear stories about the true origins and destiny of Narnia. Puzzled, they find they have to make decisions about what persons and what stories are to be trusted. Is Narnia *really* the realm of the White Witch? Or is she a usurper, whose power will be broken when two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve sit on the four thrones at Cair Paravel? Is Narnia *really* the realm of the mysterious Aslan, whose return is expected at any time?

Gradually, one narrative emerges as supremely plausible—the story of Aslan. Each individual story of Narnia turns out to be part of this greater narrative. The *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* hints at (and partially discloses) the “big picture,” expanded in the remainder of the Narnia series. This “grand narrative” of interlocking stories makes sense of the riddles of what the children see and experience around them. It allows the children to understand their experiences with a new clarity and depth, like a camera lens bringing a landscape into sharp focus.

Yet Lewis did not invent this Narnian narrative. He borrowed and adapted one that he already knew well, and had found to be true and trustworthy—the Christian narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and final consummation. Following his late evening conversation with Tolkien about Christianity as the “true myth” in September 1931, Lewis began to grasp the explanatory and imaginative power of an incarnational faith. Lewis came to believe in Christianity partly because of the quality of its literary vision—its ability to give a faithful and realistic account of life. Lewis was thus drawn to Christianity not so much by the arguments in its favour, but by grasping its compelling vision of reality, which he could not ignore—and, as events proved, could not resist.

The Chronicles of Narnia are an imaginative re-telling of the Christian “grand narrative,” fleshed out with ideas Lewis absorbed from the Christian literary tradition. The basic theological themes that Lewis set out in *Mere Christianity* are transposed to their original narrative forms, allowing the deep structure of the world to be seen with clarity and brilliance. A good and beautiful creation is spoiled and ruined by a Fall, in which the creator’s power is denied and usurped. The creator then enters into the creation to break the power of the usurper, and restore things through a redemptive sacrifice. Yet even after the coming of the redeemer, the struggle against sin and evil continues, and will not be ended until

the final restoration and transformation of all things. This Christian metanarrative—which early Christian writers called the “economy of salvation”—provides both a narrative framework and a theological underpinning to the multiple narratives woven together in Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia.

Lewis’s remarkable achievement in the Chronicles of Narnia is to allow his readers to inhabit this metanarrative—to get inside the story, and feel what it is like to be part of it. *Mere Christianity* allows us to understand Christian ideas; the Narnia stories allow us to step inside and *experience* the Christian story, and judge it by its ability to make sense of things, and “chime in” with our deepest intuitions about truth, beauty, and goodness. If the series is read in the order of publication, the reader enters this narrative in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which concerns the coming—technically the “advent”—of the Redeemer. *The Magician’s Nephew* deals with the narrative of creation and fall, while *The Last Battle* concerns the ending of the old order, and the advent of a new creation.

The remaining four novels (*Prince Caspian*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *The Horse and His Boy*, and *The Silver Chair*) deal with the period between these two advents. Lewis here explores the life of faith, lived in the tension between the past and future comings of Aslan. Aslan is now at one and the same time an object of memory and hope. Lewis speaks of an exquisite longing for Aslan, when he cannot be seen clearly; of a robust yet gracious faith, able to withstand cynicism and skepticism; of people of character who walk trustingly through the shadowlands, seeing them “in a mirror darkly,” and learning to deal with a world in which they are assaulted by evil and doubt.

But let’s move on, as time is short. This biography tries to be fair – fair to Lewis, and fair to its readers. I try to give as reliable an account as I can of Lewis’s life

and thought, treating him as neither saint nor villain, but as a profoundly interesting human being. In the book, I look at some concerns about Lewis, which I think readers would expect me to consider. The most important of these relates to Lewis's attitude towards women. From our perspective, he seems very out of date and out of place, echoing the social values of Britain in the 1940s – or maybe even the early 1900s. Some have suggested that Lewis sent one of his female characters in Narnia to hell for getting interested in boys and lipstick. I have to say that this is simply an incredible reading of the text. But that absurd reaction apart, there is still a reasonable cause for concern for modern readers of Lewis. Lewis's role models are primarily male. We must be careful not to exaggerate: a very good case can be made for Lucy being the lead character in the Narnia narratives. But the impression remains that females are secondary.

Now we can explain this, although that is not the same as defending it. Lewis belonged to an all-male professional environment. His mother died when he was young. He went to all-boys schools, served in the army, and was a student and don at all-male colleges in Oxford and Cambridge. Perhaps it's not surprising that he was not that good at relating to women, or portraying them in his narratives.

Yet at other points, Lewis was ahead of his time. While Bertrand Russell and other influential progressive thinkers argued for the compulsory sterilization of the mentally incapacitated in the 1920s and 1930s, Lewis resisted this as dehumanizing. We have long forgotten how trendy eugenics was at that time; Lewis was one of its leading critics. Similarly, Lewis was one of the leading critics of vivisection at Oxford, alienating many scientific colleagues through his forceful opposition of the practice. We must, Lewis insisted, realize that being human places certain obligations on us – and one of them is to treat animals well, and with dignity. Many critics of Narnia object to his portrayal of animals as sentient, reasoning beings. Yet when you read Lewis's critique of vivisection – which date

from the late 1940s – you realize that he is creating an imaginative world that forces us to think of animals in a new way. As moral philosophers such as Iris Murdoch have taught us, the way we see things shape the way we behave towards them. Lewis is a complex figure, who didn't really fit into his own day, and doesn't really fit into ours either.

I must end. I very much hope that you will enjoy reading this biography. But my real hope is that it will enable you to get more out of reading Lewis – whether Narnia, or his important works dealing with Christianity. One of Lewis's best books, published in 1942, is a *Preface to Paradise Lost*. It still repays study. Lewis wanted to write something that would enable his readers to get more out of reading Milton's classic. Perhaps that is what I have tried to do in this biography – provide a preface to something much more interesting, which is Lewis's writings themselves.

Thank you so much for listening!

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