

Another Biography of C.S. Lewis

A look at A.N. Wilson's C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis, by A.N. Wilson, 1990, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York.

By Lyle W. Dorsett

In 1949 Chad Walsh, at that time an obscure poet and literary critic at Beloit College in Wisconsin, published the first book on C.S. Lewis. Entitled *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics*, this long out-of-print volume is still one of the best books written on the subject. In the forty years since Walsh established himself as an authority on C.S. Lewis, over fifty books have been published on the Belfast-born, Oxford-educated author who died in November, 1963, the same day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Unfortunately, most of those subsequently published books are not as good as the first one. Walsh, to be sure, had the advantage of being first in print. But more than that, he was a superb stylist, an able critic, and he knew Lewis. Consequently the burden of every author to walk in Walsh's path has been to say something new.

In four decades some original contributions have been made to our knowledge of C.S. Lewis. The author of nearly forty books, Lewis still had fourteen years to live after Walsh's book was published. Furthermore, the celebrated Englishman wrote some of his most important books during the 1950s and early 1960s.

The first full-scale biography to appear after Lewis's death was the one co-authored by Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper. Published in 1974, this useful volume was written by Lewis's close friend Green, a well-established free-lance writer, and at the time, an obscure American named Walter Hooper who spent a few weeks doing some secretarial chores for Lewis in 1963.

Warren H. Lewis, the older brother of the famous author, had authorized the volume done by Green and Hooper. Before Warren Lewis's death, however, he expressed concern that Hooper would make himself out to be a close friend and confidant of the Lewis brothers—especially Jack (the name Lewis was called by all his friends). In truth, Hooper barely knew C.S. Lewis but one would never know this from reading the book. Indeed, Roger Lancelyn Green told me a few years ago that the one thing he would change about the book if he could redo it was to make it clear that Hooper's relationship with Jack was brief and superficial.² Green said he did not see the draft of the last portion of the book before it went to print. Warren Lewis, of course, died before it was published so he never saw *in print* what he predicted would happen.

Hooper's curious desire to depict himself as Lewis's long and close friend notwithstanding, the book he and Green did was the standard work on Lewis's life and writing until the 1980s. Not until 1986 did a new full-scale life of Lewis appear. This time it was written by William Griffin, an editor for two decades, first at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and later at Macmillan. During those years Griffin acquired and edited numerous books of Lewisiana, thereby establishing himself as an expert in the field. Now the Religious Books Editor for *Publishers Weekly*, Griffin,

who is also an able novelist and playwright, wrote a biography entitled *Clive Staples Lewis, A Dramatic Life*. This immense book of nearly 500 pages is well written, and it has the unique quality of letting Lewis speak for himself. An author of remarkable restraint, Griffin doggedly refuses to pass judgment on Lewis, his friends and associates. Letting the famous writer speak for himself, Griffin quotes countless letters, diaries and books. Ultimately the Lewis we see is one Lewis wanted us to see.

Not every student of Lewis studies was satisfied with Griffin's original but aloof approach. Therefore when *Jack: C.S., Lewis and His Times* by George Sayer appeared in 1988, it was eagerly picked up by those who had read Lewis's works but yearned to get a closer look at the man. Sayer – Lewis's close personal friend for thirty years – wrote a book that made Lewis come alive for those who never knew him. Full of Sayer's keen insights, as well as rich quotations from his correspondence with Lewis, this book is at once a personal memoir, an in-depth biography, and a work of insightful literary criticism. In brief, it is a superb book and eminently worthy of its subject.

Because *Jack* is such a splendid book, many people will be puzzled as to why we need another biography two years later. The answer to that question is easy. Sayer's book has all of the strengths of being written by an intelligent man who knew Lewis well. But there is a certain myopia that comes from such a perspective too. Furthermore, it is well known that some major primary sources have become available to serious researchers since Sayer finished the first draft of his book. For example, over 2000 volumes from C.S. Lewis's personal library -- many complete with his incisive marginal notes – were acquired and made available by the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College. Furthermore, approximately fifty oral history interviews that contain the reminiscences of some of Lewis's closest friends and associates are available at the Wade Center as well. Added to these treasures are Joy Davidman's (Mrs. C.S. Lewis) letters which are now open to the public, as well as many letters written by Lewis's brother Warren. The latter man's diaries – complete with major portions never published – are also open to researchers since Sayer completed his book.

When word reached us that A.N. Wilson was under contract to do a Lewis biography, I was delighted. Wilson is one of the most intelligent writers and gifted stylists of our time. Likewise he has made some important contributions to the genre of biography with his books on Hilaire Belloc, John Milton, and Leo Tolstoy.

To my utter dismay and great disappointment A.N. Wilson spent less than three hours in the Marion E. Wade Center. Despite the fact that his book will leave the reader with the impression that he knows Wheaton College and the Wade collection well, he made an afternoon visit to our archives in the midst of a slightly longer trip to Chicago.

What is so sad about Wilson's slipshod scholarship is that he missed an opportunity to look at incredibly rich sources that no one else has used. His talent and insights could have shaped those materials into a truly original contribution. But alas, we have a new book on Lewis that tells us nothing original. On the contrary, it is replete with factual errors tied to a rather simplistic Freudian framework. Wilson argues that Lewis spent his life in search of a mother. (His mother died when he was a boy). During this quest, according to Wilson, Lewis had two extra-marital affairs with women who were mother substitutes to him. In fact, Wilson presents

no conclusive evidence for his thesis. Indeed, much of his evidence is factually incorrect. For example, Wilson maintains that Joy Davidman and C.S. Lewis slept together in 1955 before they were married. Wilson's source is Douglas Gresham's oral history interview with me. But this assertion is not in the interview because Lewis's stepson never made such a statement. In this same vein Wilson has nothing but assumptions to support his thesis that Lewis had an affair with Mrs. Janie Moore.

The reliability of Wilson's book is questionable for still other reasons. To the point, the biography is replete with factual errors -- the sort that happen when a book is hastily conceived, researched and written. For example, Westchester County should read Dutchess County (p. 236), and the Wade Center at Wheaton College has no memorabilia of T.S. Eliot (p. xiii). Malcolm Muggeridge's typewriter is not and never has been at Wheaton College (p. xiii), and the political preferences of Billy Graham and C.S. Lewis are actually rather similar and in a word, conservative, despite Wilson's argument to the contrary (p. xiii).

Errors of this kind are annoying, but they are to be expected when a researcher implies that he has combed a collection he has scarcely had a glimpse of. Nevertheless, the most tiresome aspect of this book is the patronizing tone. Everyone the author writes about is denigrated -- Walter Hooper, Warren Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, J.B. Phillips, Joy Davidman Lewis, and even C.S. Lewis himself.

Frankly A.N. Wilson's omniscience and preciousness wears rather thin. C.S. Lewis has a "workable intelligence" (p. 197), *That Hideous Strength* is "self-indulgent" (p. 189), all of the books in the space trilogy "fail" (p. 191), and Lewis displays "sheer inadequacy as a philosopher." (p. 213), The list of such "insights" go on ad nauseam.

In the last analysis, A.N. Wilson's *C.S. Lewis* is more than a disappointing biography, it is a sad portrait of the biographer. It seems that Wilson's recent literary successes have driven him to the point of hubris. He simply sees himself as superior to everyone he writes about, and he delights in making his discovery known.

In brief, if you are in the market for a book on C.S. Lewis buy Sayer's *Jack* or Griffin's, *Clive Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life*. I certainly would not spend \$22.50 for A.N. Wilson's impressionistic and distorted portrait of a man he neither understands nor takes seriously enough to do his homework on.

1. See W.H. Lewis's letters to Walter Hooper in the C.S. Lewis collection at the U. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. See also the unpublished diaries of W.H. Lewis in the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Illinois.

2. See the oral history interview dated June 12, 1986 at the Wade Center, Wheaton College.