

C. S. Lewis: A Profile of His Life

By Lyle Dorsett

"I'm tall, fat, rather bald, red-faced, double-chinned, black-haired, have a deep voice, and wear glasses for reading," C.S. Lewis wrote to a young admirer in 1954. If the famous author had been prone to notice clothing, he might have added that his trousers were usually in dire need of pressing, his jackets threadbare and blemished by snags and food spots, and his shoes scuffed and worn at the heels.

But Jack, as C.S. Lewis's friends knew him, was not bothered by fashion. It is not that he was slovenly. On the contrary, he was meticulous about the precise use of words, the quality of evidence presently in arguments, and the meter in verse. Nevertheless, the style and condition of personal attire was near the bottom of his list of concerns, whereas books and ideas were among his top priorities.

Early Influences

Lewis was born into a bookish family of Protestants in Belfast, Ireland, November 29, 1898. His father, Albert, and his mother, Florence Augusta Hamilton, possessed first-rate minds, and they were members of the Church of Ireland. Eclectic in their reading tastes, they purchased and read many books, and their love for the printed word was passed on to their children. Jack and Warren (his only sibling, three years his senior) were not only read to aloud and taught to read, they were encourage to use the large family library.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis recalled early memories of "endless books." "There were books in the study, books in the dining room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds," he remembered, and none were off limits to him. On rainy days – and there were many in northern Ireland – he pulled volumes off the shelves and entered into worlds created by authors such as Conan Doyle, E. Nesbit, Mark Twain, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

After brother Warnie was sent off to boarding school in England, Jack became somewhat reclusive. He spent more time in books and an imaginary world of "dressed animals" and "knights in armor." But he did more than read books, he wrote and illustrated his own stories as well.

If Warren Lewis's exile across the Irish Sea to school in 1905 drove Jack further into himself and books, his mother's death from cancer in 1908 made him even more withdrawn. Mrs. Lewis's death came just three months prior to Jack's tenth birthday, and the young man was hurt deeply by her passing. Not only did he lose a mother, his father never fully recovered from her death. For many years thereafter, both boys felt estranged from their father, and home life was never warm and satisfying again.

The death of Mrs. Lewis convinced young Jack that the God he encountered in church and in the Bible his mother gave him was, if not cruel, at least a vague abstraction. Four or five

years later, by 1911 or 1912, and with the additional influence of a spiritually unorthodox boarding school matron, Lewis forsook Christianity and became an avowed atheist.

By autumn 1914 C.S. Lewis was somewhat adrift. He had lost his faith and his mother, and he felt alienated from his father. He was extremely close to his brother, but they saw one another only on holidays. A new friendship was beginning with a fellow student, Arthur Greeves, but it was interrupted in September when C.S. Lewis was sent to Great Bookham, Surrey, to be privately tutored by W.T. Kirkpatrick, a brilliant teacher and friend of Lewis's father.

"The Great Knock," as the Lewis family dubbed Mr. Kirkpatrick, had a profound effect upon the teenaged youth. He introduced him to the classics in Greek, Latin, and Italian literature, and helped him make a beginning in German. Kirkpatrick not only led Lewis to great books, he pushed him to understand them in the original languages. A most demanding tutor, Kirkpatrick helped Jack learn how to criticize and analyze, and he taught him how to think, speak, and write logically. Consequently, after nearly three years with Kirkpatrick, C.S. Lewis was tough-minded and widely read. Many years later, Lewis wrote in *Surprised by Joy* that "My debt to him is very great, my reverence to this day undiminished."

The debt was large indeed. Kirkpatrick helped the young man prepare for scholarship examinations at Oxford, and the demanding mentor played no small role in Lewis's outstanding performance at University College, where he took highest honors in honor moderations, greats, and English in 1920, 1922, and 1923, respectively.

If Kirkpatrick taught Lewis to think critically – to demand evidence for even the most casual assertions – Oxford introduced him to a wide horizon of ideas. Whereas Lewis's hard-pressing mentor had helped him reinforce his atheism, a few associates at Oxford forced him to re-examine his belief in a universe without God.

Oxford Years

Lewis entered the world of Oxford in 1917 as a student, and he never really left. Despite an interruption to fight in World War I and his professorship at Cambridge beginning in 1955, he always maintained his home and friends in Oxford. He loved the bookshops, the pubs, and the Bodleian Library, and he reveled in the company of local men who loved to read, write, and discuss books. His attachment to Oxford was so strong that when he taught at Cambridge from 1955 to 1963 he commuted back to Oxford on weekends so that he could be close to familiar places and beloved friends.

It was in Oxford that Lewis pursued things of the mind with fervor. Ideas, books, and debates were ordinary fare in this heady environment. With no particular purpose in life beyond stimulating his imagination, feeding his intellectual curiosity, and writing for publication and posterity, he thoroughly enjoyed academic life. In 1919 he published his first book, a cycle of lyrics entitled *Spirits in Bondage*, which he wrote under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton. In 1924 he became a philosophy tutor at University College. Then in 1925 he was elected a fellow of Magdalen College, where he tutored in English

language and literature. The next year his second volume of poetry, *Dymer*, was published under the name Clive Hamilton.

Alongside the generally self-centered life Lewis was leading, he demonstrated a loyal and generous nature. When his college roommate, Paddy Moore, was killed in World War I, Jack befriended Paddy's mother, Mrs. Janie King Moore, and her adolescent daughter Maureen. Then in 1920, after completing his first degree, Lewis decided to share lodgings with them so that he could more carefully look out for their needs.

Spiritual Awakening

This gesture of kindness did more than help Mrs. Moore and Maureen; it got C.S. Lewis outside of himself and taught him patience. The association with the Moores also introduced him to Mrs. Moore's brother, a combat veteran who suffered from a severe war-inflicted nervous disorder. This personal encounter apparently shook Lewis's confidence in materialism, because a letter he wrote in 1923 to his friend Arthur Greeves suggests a slight spiritual awakening. It seems that the "Doc," as the Moores and Lewis referred to him, came to stay with the trio for three weeks. During the visit "Doc" underwent an ordeal of extreme mental torture. After the attack, when the poor wretch was hospitalized, Lewis wrote to his friend that "Doc" had believed he was in Hell. He wore out his body in the "awful mental tortures," and then died from heart failure – "unconscious at the end thank God." Lewis concluded his observation by suggesting it is "a damned world – and we once thought we could be happy with books and music!"

The spiritual awakening continued, enhanced by reading books by George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton. One MacDonald volume called *Phantastes* had a powerful impact on his thinking. "What it actually did to me," wrote Lewis, "was to convert, even to baptize ...my imagination." At Oxford Lewis continued to read MacDonald, and he imbibed G.K. Chesterton as well. The latter author's books, especially *The Everlasting Man*, raised serious questions about the young intellectual's materialism.

While MacDonald and Chesterton were stirring Lewis's thoughts, a close friend, Owen Barfield, with whom he spent much time during and after their student years, pounced on the logic of Jack Lewis's atheism. Barfield became atheist, and then a Christian, and he frequently badgered Lewis about his materialism. So did Nevill Coghill, a fellow student and lifelong friend who was brilliant, yet was, to Lewis's amazement, "a Christian and a thorough-going supernaturalist."

Soon after joining the English faculty at Magdalen College, Lewis met two more Christians, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien. These men became close friends of Lewis. He admired their brilliance and their logic. Soon Lewis recognized that most of his friends, like his favorite authors – MacDonald, Chesterton, Johnson, Spenser, and Milton – held to this Christian angle of vision which threatened his whole world view.

Gradually during the 1920s, two paths were converging in Lewis's mind: one was reason, the other intuition. In 1929 these roads met, and C.S. Lewis surrendered and admitted that "God was God, and knelt and prayed." Within two years the reluctant convert admitted

that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—God Incarnate. With this revelation the Oxford don became a communicant in the Church of England.

A New Life

Christian history shows that when men and women meet Jesus, recognize His Nature, and then decide to trust and follow Him, they become strikingly different people. Those who convert— who turn around and obey Christ’s command to “follow me” — are clearly people with changed lives.

If evidence of conversion is a new life, C.S. Lewis was obviously a believer after 1931. Many changes were apparent. His life now had a purpose—to know and obey God. This came to fruition most demonstrably in his writing. Earlier efforts to become a poet were laid to rest. The new Christian devoted his talent and energy to writing prose that reflected his recently found faith. Within two years of his conversion Lewis published *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. This little volume opened a thirty-year stream of books on Christian apologetics and discipleship that became a lifelong avocation. Between 1933 and his death in 1963, C.S. Lewis wrote books including the seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and *Mere Christianity*, that nudged atheists and agnostics toward the faith, and encourage and nurtured believers.

As a good steward and responsible professional, Lewis did not ignore his academic discipline. He wrote literary history and criticism such as *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. These books are still widely read and highly regarded.

Despite the large quantity and high quality of his academic publications, Lewis became known as a literary evangelist. The tone and impact of his theological and apologetical books help account for this reputation, as did his own assertion in a rejoinder to his critic, Dr. W.N. Pittenger, published in *The Christian Century*, November 26, 1958, where Lewis admitted that most of what he wrote “is evangelistic.”

A Growing Reputation

If Christianity altered Lewis’s writing habits, the publication of those books had a palpable effect on his personal life. First of all, the change was manifested in the mail. Once Lewis’s books became popular, which they did by the 1940s, he was inundated by letters. Because the famous author believed it was God’s will for him to answer most of this mail himself, and because he was convinced, as he said in “The Weight Of Glory,” that there are “no ordinary people,” he took time to write with care to each correspondent regardless of age, education, or place in society. This enterprise consumed many hours each week.

Furthermore, life with fame was laden with other pressures. There were numerous invitations to entertain guests, grant interviews, give lectures, and preach sermons. Writing, to be sure, is a lonely enterprise. This Lewis understood. And even though he felt called by God to write, he likewise felt it was required of him to counsel those who made the pilgrimage to The Kilns, his home on the edge of Oxford. Frequently he believed it was

his calling to explain the Christian faith to people over BBC radio, and to the airmen at the RAF bases during World War II.

Preaching sermons, giving talks, and expressing his theological views over the radio throughout the United Kingdom bolstered Lewis's reputation and increased his book sales. With these new circumstances came other changes – not the least being a marked upswing in annual income. Throughout the 1920s Lewis had been getting by on little money. During his student years his father provided an allowance, and Jack supplemented that in various ways. Nevertheless, money was always scarce. And when the young academician took on the responsibility for Mrs. Moore and her daughter, finances were always tight even with the regular tutorial stipend.

As book royalties mounted during the later 1940s, and continued to spiral upward thereafter, C.S. Lewis refused to upgrade his standard of living. Partly out of disdain for conspicuous living, but mostly out of commitment to Jesus Christ, he established a charitable fund for his royalty earnings.

Neither the extent nor the recipients of C.S. Lewis's charity are fully known. Indeed, he made valiant efforts to conceal this information. It is known that he supported numerous impoverished families, and underwrote education fees for orphans and poor seminarians, and put monies into scores of charities and church ministries.

A Late Marriage

The outreach of Lewis's books and the impact of his charity conspired to make still another significant change in his lifestyle. During the last decade of his earthly pilgrimage, Lewis's world was invaded by an American woman and her two children. In autumn 1952 Joy Davidman Gresham, who had become a Christian partly because she read *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*, visited her spiritual mentor in England. Soon thereafter her husband abandoned her for another woman. In the meantime the divorcee, a writer in her own right, moved to London with her two adolescent boys, David and Douglas.

Joy Davidman Gresham gradually fell into financial trouble. Her acquaintance with C.S. Lewis led to his underwriting the boarding school education of David and Douglas. From charity and common literary interests grew a deep friendship, and eventually *agape* became *eros*. They were married in 1956.

Joy was sixteen years Lewis's junior, but that did not prevent a happy marriage. A savage case of cancer, however, cut short their life together. After several years of reprieve from an earlier and nearly fatal bout with cancer, Joy Lewis passed away in Oxford July 13, 1960.

Joy's entry into Jack's life brought much happiness. As he wrote to one friend soon after their marriage, "It's funny having at 59 the sort of happiness most men have in their twenties..." "Thou has kept the good wine till now'." Joy brought C.S. Lewis love, companionship, and two stepsons, complete with all of the delights and problems that naturally come in such circumstances. Furthermore, Mrs. Lewis brought insights, ideas, and a new angle of vision. Raised in a Jewish home, and having written a book on the Ten

Commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain*, she encouraged him to renew his writing of apologetics, in particular *Reflections on the Psalms*. Her influence on what Jack considered his best book, *Till We Have Faces*, was so profound that he told one close friend she was actually his co-author.

Critics Emerge

C.S. Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman did not enhance his reputation in Great Britain. Long assumed to be a confirmed bachelor, the esteemed professor not only married late in life, he married an American who was at once Jewish, divorced, and personally rather abrasive. In brief, the marriage did not set well with most of Mr. Lewis's friends and acquaintances. The critics notwithstanding, Jack's faithful brother Warren – who lived at The Kilns with Jack before, during, and after the years with Joy – supported him, as did a few other close friends.

C.S. Lewis was hurt by the disapproval of his old friends and colleagues, but it was by no means a new experience for him. Although he enjoyed the conviviality of weekly get-togethers with fellow Inklings (intellectuals and writers who met regularly to exchange ideas and share in good conversation), and the prodigious successes of his books, Lewis was frequently under attack for his decidedly Christian lifestyle. Close friends, among them Owen Barfield and J.R.R. Tolkien, openly disapproved of Lewis's evangelistic speaking and writing. And if the opprobrium of fellow believers was unpleasant, it was mild compared with the attacks from colleagues and strangers who did not share the Oxford author's faith.

It is common knowledge that Lewis's "Christian" books caused so much disapproval that he was more than once passed over for a professorship at Oxford, with the honors going to men of lesser reputation. It was Magdalene College at Cambridge University that finally honored Lewis with a chair in 1955 and thereby recognized his original and important contributions to English literary history and criticism.

Along with Lewis's international reputation, ever-growing royalties, and thousands of fans throughout the English-speaking world, came increasing alienation. Did Lewis take comfort in his Lord's warning in the Sermon on the Mount that his disciples would indeed be insulted and persecuted? We do not know.

Lewis died at The Kilns on November 22, 1963. He is buried beside his brother, who lived ten more years, in the cemetery of Holy Trinity Church, Headington Quarry, Oxford. His letters and books, and the lives these writings touch, are his legacy.