

Critical Notes on McGrath's biography of C. S. Lewis

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Alistair McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life. Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 2013. 431 pp. ISBN 978-1-4143-3935-1.

These notes on McGrath's biography of C. S. Lewis are published on the Lewisiana website simultaneously with my **review essay** on the website of the *Journal of Inklings Studies*; the review is scheduled to appear in print in Volume 4, Nr. 1 (Spring 2014). Readers will find several points or passages from the essay repeated in the notes, usually at some greater length.

My chief aim in publishing the notes is to offer the fullest underpinning I can give for the verdict expressed and argued in the review. To do so seemed in order because the verdict is unfavourable while few Lewis scholars appear to share it.

Two further considerations may help to excuse what may otherwise seem to betray a pathologically fault-finding temper. First, as proof-reader of the book's Dutch translation I happened to be in a good position to spot inaccuracies, while as a translator of one earlier Lewis biography (George Sayer, 1988) and critic of yet another (A. N. Wilson, 1990), and as translator of many of Lewis's books, I found it perhaps comparatively easy to see not just what was wrong, but how it could be righted and to explain why. Once these notes were made I felt that readers of the book have a right to them.

Second, I think McGrath's book not merely disappointing but a lost opportunity. Half a century after the death of C. S. Lewis it seemed high time, and the proper moment, to honour his memory and legacy with the nearest approach to a definitive biography. What we have instead is another biography which at best is in some respects adequate for the moment. Indeed, the chief value of McGrath's book might be its power to push Wilson's into oblivion.

How to make the great leap forward? Perhaps the ideal is not attainable by any single author. What seems required in any case is a cautious publisher who believes in relentless fact-checking and criticism at every level, from every quarter. May the following notes inspire the next biographer to produce the book that will leave the critics speechless.

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1. QUESTIONABLE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

50 *“the trauma of his wartime experiences, whose irrationality called into question whether there was any meaning in the universe at large or in Lewis’s personal existence in particular.”*

— But it is very much as if that question, for him, had by then been settled for years: there was no meaning in the universe. Large-scale irrationality was nothing to be puzzled about but a thing to be endured in hopes of its going away some day. McGrath ignores the relevant passages in Lewis’s letters of 1918-19 and also ignores the fact that in later years he occasionally did mention the effect of prolonged shelling. McGrath speaks (51) of “the potentially devastating memories of his traumatic experiences” but never mentions Lewis’s plain and plausible meaning when he explained in what sense he found boarding school worse than the trenches.

51 *“Lewis’s mental map of reality had difficulty accommodating the trauma of the Great War.”*

— This goes straight against all the available evidence. The idea at least requires a definition of what is meant by “accommodation”. Accommodating the trauma appears to be pretty exactly what Lewis did with a rare degree of success. The only way for the biographer to escape this fact is to rule out its possibility from the outset and resolutely cling to this denial.

51 *“Like so many, [Lewis] found the settled way of looking at the world ... to have been shattered ... “Lewis’s immediate postwar years were dominated by a search for meaning ...” etc.*

— It is at best doubtful, on this point as on many others, to suggest that Lewis was “like so many”. Cf. p. 123, regarding his conversion: “The real issue lies in the destruction of the fixed certainties, values and aspirations of an earlier generation ... by the mass carnage of modern warfare”. McGrath mentions “much English literature of the 1920s” here to suggest that Lewis shared the attitude expressed in that literature, but never begins to make this plausible. Some psychoanalytical fantasies about Lewis’s conversion are rejected because “the evidence does not warrant such a conclusion” (123); but there is no more evidence for McGrath’s own idea that Lewis’s post-war “search for meaning” was mainly inspired by that war.

51 “a ‘treaty’ by which reality could be tamed, adapted, and constrained ... a ‘frontier’ that certain thoughts would not be allowed to penetrate. ... This ‘treaty with reality’ would play a critical role in Lewis’s development ...”

— The relevant passage in *Surprised by Joy*, chapter 10 (“it was rather a treaty with reality, the fixing of a frontier”) is taken by McGrath to be sheer description of Lewis’s 1916 attitude to the war. It is in fact a brief *defence* of that attitude by the mature man and Christian of 1955. The phrase “treaty with reality” is Lewis’s defence of his youthful attitude against possible charges that it was a flight from or denial of reality. It therefore seems wrong to treat that phrase as a licence or springboard for psychological fantasies about the supposed effects of Lewis’s war experience on various later developments. All the passages where McGrath does so (pp. 64, 135, 139, 158, 170, 191, 342-343) are consistently lacking in evidence from the sources. The available evidence consistently contradicts the idea that Lewis regarded the war as a great personal divide or turning point. The sources are quite consistent in suggesting that, at least in a philosophical sense, Lewis never “had difficulty accommodating the trauma” either as an atheist or as a Christian.

64 “This note of wistfulness over the irretrievability of a loved past is a recurrent theme in Lewis’s later writings.”

— An example would be welcome; it is hard to think of unambiguous examples of such a theme.

64 “Who is ‘D’?”

— Lewis’s choice for the capital D as a marker for Mrs Moore in his diaries is never explained. On p. 74, a reference to Demeter seems obvious, but is not actually proposed. Instead, a comparison is developed which makes little sense: a fusion of qualities supposedly embodied in Mrs Moore is compared to a desired fusion of Athene and Demeter as representing Reason and Imagination. However, it is hard to see a clear parallel with Moore’s fusion of maid (or rather mistress) and mother; even if this was evident, we still have to find out why Lewis chose D, not A, or A&D. If it was because D was neither a maid nor particularly rational (cf. 96, “she was no intellectual, and was unable to function as his academic soulmate”), then the idea of a fusion is irrelevant. The passage then briefly drifts into a discussion of the problematic relation of reason and imagination, which is said to have engaged Lewis “at the intellectual level” (74). This is a supremely important subject, but it is out of place here, and what is worse, it is never adequately treated elsewhere in the book.

Note 49 says Hooper “came to the view” that D represents a Greek Delta (Δ), but the reader does not learn that it was Warnie Lewis who, in transcribing the Lewis Papers on a typewriter, simply had to transcribe his brother’s handwritten Δ as the typewriter’s D. Nor does McGrath mention the plausible speculation proposed long ago by John Bremer: “To anyone steeped in the classics as Lewis was, it is clear that delta is an abbreviation for Diotima, the mantic woman from Mantinea who introduces Socrates to the meaning of Love in Plato’s *Symposium*” (*The World & I*, December 1991, p. 408, review of *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis, 1922-1927*).

- 69 *“For Lewis, books were both a link to the remembered – if sentimentally exaggerated – bliss of a lost past and a balm for the trauma and hopelessness of the present.”*
 — It is hardly remarkable for a soldier in wartime to write letters in which he fondly remembers favourite past episodes of life at home. A much more useful reference here would have been to the passage in *SbJ* where Lewis says the first whistling shells or bullets reminded him of Homer: this would both more interesting and more characteristic of Lewis, and no sentimental exaggeration is here in view. McGrath also seems to slur over the difference between remembering the “lost past” of one’s own early years and contemplating earlier or mythical stages in the history of mankind.
- 69 *“Clement Attlee ... calmed his nerves by imagining a walk through Oxford Lewis preferred to read books to achieve that same outcome.”*
 — Lewis was addicted to reading and would read in any circumstances which would at all permit reading. If he appears to be “keeping the world at bay” through reading, it should be realized that, for him as a soldier, this was a happy side effect rather than an important part of his motivation to read. His chief or only motivation to read was the pleasure it gave him. In later life and perhaps already at that date, he was quite particular about purity of motivation on this point. No ideas about other motivations should be allowed to shape our psychological fantasies.
- 74 *“a memory that Lewis so clearly cherished”*
 — The evidence is too scant for any “clear” views. One of the other two memories noted is unlikely to have been a cherished one: “Here I first was brought home drunk” (61).
- 91 *“Maureen was happy at Headington School, and Lewis had no desire to disrupt either her education or her social life. [Lewis] withdrew his application[for a job at Reading University] ... As might be expected, he offered a quite different explanation of the situation to his father.”*
 — In his diary for 3 July 1922 Lewis wrote “the Reading job has been given to someone with a name like Mabbot at Exeter ... On the whole it is rather a relief to have the difficult alternative out of our minds.” If there are reasons elsewhere to interpret this as a withdrawal, McGrath does not state them since he gives no source at all. If the “withdrawal” idea is a distortion, which it appears to be, it is pretty exactly the one presented in Wilson’s biography. Wilson was suggesting that Lewis was henpecked by Mrs Moore in this as in many other respects. In fact, as regards the job at Reading, Lewis wrote (2 July 1922): “It was hard to decide yes or no ... and D was so anxious not to influence me that I cd. not be quite sure what her wishes were – I am equally in the dark as to what my own real wishes are, apart from the mood of the moment ...”
- 95 *“It is arguable that Mrs Moore created an environment of relative structure and stability ... easing his transition into academic life”*
 — Something of the sort must indeed have been the case, but McGrath’s way of putting it here seems unfortunate. A stable environment and easy transition into academic life would surely have been more readily available if Lewis had simply

conformed to each day's full round of college life and had no extra-academic "family" to keep in touch with on the outskirts of Oxford.

98 "*Heavy Lewis' in that he was perceived to be 'heavy going'*"

— The interpretation is not argued.

100 "*Lewis found the study of English exhausting ... But the real problem was*" etc.

— In fact he started this study on the correct assumption that he had already done much of the required reading. To go by his diaries, what made matters difficult was the restless and unstable situation of his "family"; except for that, it seems certain that he would have pursued his study of English without the least sign of exhaustion. At any rate he got a First after only nine months in spite of the domestic difficulties.

143 "*second class*" friends ... *J. R. R. Tolkien*

— Here is one obvious cause for doubt whether Tolkien has not been given too much, and Barfield too little attention in this book.

146-147 "*Lewis's rhetoric at this point ... faith as 'wish-fulfilment'.*"

— This is plausible in light of Lewis's engagement with Freudianism in those days, as evidenced by his diaries and Barfield's testimony. But the same rhetoric may no less plausibly be suspected in the passage where Lewis assures us that his father's death "does not really come into the story I am telling" (*SbJ* ch. 14; and there is also the remarkable chronological parallel of Warnie's conversion, see p. 157). From passages on pp. 124 and 140, McGrath appears to be curiously unreceptive to this idea in connection with his revised date for Lewis's conversion to belief in God.

147 "*a paper trail of disconnected ideas and memories*"

— This applies only to the very last part of *Surprised by Joy*. For the rest, to describe it thus is to dismiss without argument Lewis's obvious purpose of offering a series of *connected* ideas.

154 "*Lewis's heightened attention to the bluebells*"

— Bluebells may be well-known flowers in Britain, so that Lewis could not have been wrong about them; but in an inquiry like this it should be remembered that Lewis was usually perhaps as ignorant of flower names as he was muddled about dates. At the same time it is hard to suppose, as McGrath does without hesitation, that Lewis was mixing up the memories of sitting in a *car* (in the bluebell season of 1932, early June) and of sitting in a *sidecar* (28 September 1931). McGrath sensibly refrains from drawing definitive conclusions and revising the standard account of Lewis's conversion to Christian belief. However, attentive readers are left with a sense that the four and a half pages spent on these speculations are not well spent.

170-171 "*To many readers today ...*"

— Here and elsewhere, McGrath's concern about today's readers betrays this book's character of an extended contemporary comment on the Lewis phenomenon, disguised as biography.

- 173 “*Lewis here anticipates his ‘argument from desire’ which is central to the Christian apologetic he would develop further in his wartime radio broadcasts a decade later.*”
 — “Anticipate” is hardly the correct word since Lewis is being quoted from his 1943 preface to the book, written during the years of his radio talks, and not from the text he wrote in 1932. The suggestion that Lewis ever talked of an “argument from desire” is false (the phrase never appeared until 1985 when John Beversluis introduced it, construing this ‘argument’ as a syllogistic straw man for him to cut down, after which Peter Kreeft began to defend and exalt it); the suggestion that the development of this “argument” constituted a major part or key element of the radio talks is little more than McGrath’s very questionable interpretation.
- 174 “*At this stage, Lewis tends to see the imagination ...*”
 — The idea of a gradual maturing of Lewis’s views remains both vague and ambiguous. Cf. p. 158, “Although Lewis would continue to explore the relation of reason and imagination in the domain of faith, the fundamental features of his settled understanding of Christianity were now in place” – as if that relation was not itself a fundamental feature. The whole account of Lewis’s development seems intended to make plausible a final “shift to fiction” (233) and general triumph or liberation of “the imaginative man” in Lewis (cf. *Collected Letters III*, 516).
- 178 “*Lewis was part of an extended writing community*” etc.
 — It remains unclear what is meant by this, except for a few female writers mentioned a little further on; the issue soon drifts into a discussion of Lewis’s ideas about women. Both of the next two paragraphs start with “Nevertheless”: the views developed here seem in fact rather undeveloped.
- 184 “*The focus of The Allegory of Love is the idea of ‘courtly love’*”
 — Certainly not: there are *two* “foci”, as indicated both by the book’s title and its first two chapters: 1. Courtly Love, 2. Allegory. McGrath admits as much on the next page, now suggesting that the other focus is the chief one (“Lewis’s concern is actually with the poetic conventions” etc.). What is more, if we are to give special attention here to “themes that find religious transposition” in Lewis’s later work (182), then allegory surely must come before courtly love.
- 190 “*Lewis would later term this view ‘the poison of subjectivism’.*”
 — “The personal heresy” and ethical subjectivism may well be related items in the modern mind-set, but it is certainly better not to equate them, or to make their names exchangeable.
- 204 “*orgy of egoism*”
 — The date given for this episode and for Lewis’s letter to Father Adams, October 1941, is wrong: it was October 1940, when Lewis’s sudden rise to national fame had not yet occurred. Apart from that, the letter itself makes it clear that the “orgy of egoism”, real or anticipated, did not *cause* Lewis to begin his weekly confessions. We simply don’t know a clear cause, and McGrath’s suggestion (that the move is “probably linked to this concern”) evidently results from a misreading: what Lewis feared was that the confessions *themselves* might turn into an “orgy of egoism”.

- 221 *“the business of becoming or being a Christian requires commitment to a specific form of this basic Christianity ... Indeed, it is Lewis’s explicit commitment to this [non-specific] form of Christianity that has made him a figure of such universal appeal ...”*
 — The two “commitments” mentioned here must be of a crucially different nature. The differences or parallels are not noted or explored.
- 221 *“the grand Christian vision of reality ... the breadth and depth of his vision of Christianity”*
 — Phrases like “vision of Christianity” or “vision of the Christian faith” never appear in Lewis’s works and seem quite alien to his thought and language; but they are the staple of McGrath’s language about Lewis. It is almost impossible to make out exactly what they mean. The meaning of “vision” often seems to shade into “version” or “approach”, or “conception” (as on page 373, last paragraph). But this becomes less plausible when “vision of Christianity” seems, as it does here, to be exchangeable with “Christian vision”.
- 222 *“His approach is inferential, not deductive.”*
 — On page 260 a reference is made to the “deductive or inductive argumentative approaches of his wartime broadcast talks.” The sort of readership assumed in most of this biography will not be familiar with any of these terms. Page 223 mentions “a series of argumentative moves”, and 232 has “evidence-based reasoning”. No help is offered to understand Lewis as a rational thinker: that subject is treated, in so far as it is treated, as a slightly embarrassing aspect from which we had better keep our distance.
- 222 *“For Lewis, Christianity is the ‘big picture’ which weaves together” etc.*
 — This emphasis is quite un-Lewisian. He would never stress the bigness of the picture without stressing, first and foremost, its *truth* and the supreme importance of *obedience* (a word never occurring in this book except for one minor instance in connection with courtly love, p. 184).
- 224 *“The second line of argument concerns our experience of longing.”*
 — In McGrath’s survey of the contents of *Mere Christianity* (pp. 222-226), this second line appears as the last of only two. This line is called an “approach” in the next sentence; a little further on it is presented as a second “clue” (“Like right and wrong, this ... is thus a ‘clue’ ...” etc.) in addition to the clue mentioned in the title of Lewis’s first series of broadcast talks. On the next page, Lewis’s “arguments from both morality and desire” are established as the overall message of *Mere Christianity*, and what follows leads up to the famous quotation “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen” etc. The “vision” thing seems paramount: uninformed readers will hardly guess that extensive discussions of “Christian Behaviour” and the doctrine of the Trinity fill more than two thirds of Lewis’s book, and that it ends, as did the 1942 *Broadcast Talks*, in a serious call to conversion. The section as a whole is at best a heavily biased account of the book; it appears to convey what McGrath personally thinks most illuminating or useful in *Mere Christianity*.

225 “*In his arguments from both morality and desire, Lewis appeals to the capacity of Christianity to ‘fit in’ ...*” etc.

— To present this duo of arguments as an exquisitely Lewisian idea is at best a debatable interpretation. What is really characteristic of Lewis’s writings of the early 1940s is his recurring insistence on the arguments *from reason and from morality* in tandem, or as two sides of one coin, and as coming close to a purely philosophical argument for the existence of God. The so-called argument from desire is only employed on the assumption of an established Christian belief in God.

227 “*The original form ... was much less trenchant*”

— The idea seems to be based on a confusion over the publication history and on partly imaginary differences between *Broadcast Talks* and *Mere Christianity*. As for the issue at hand, in the last year of his life Lewis explicitly stated that there had been “no substantial change” to his Trilemma idea (see “Cross-Examination”, May 1963).

227 “*Lewis failed to account for the concerns of more recent New Testament scholarship*

— For an adequate discussion we need to know to which extent Lewis was ignoring the scholarship of his own day, not of later scholarship.

227-228 “*another problem concerns the ‘datedness’ of the material in Lewis’s broadcast talks.*”

— This is not just another problem but a very different one. It is not the business of biography, and in no way peculiar to Lewis.

228 “*the modern reader’s difficulties often reflect Lewis’s success as a communicator in the 1940s*”

— Today’s reader will usually have some such difficulties with *any* communicator from any past period, irrespective of any past success or lack of it. The interesting question here is why Lewis’s edited radio talks after six decades are still drawing and inspiring a good many new readers. The previous point in this section – on Lewis’s “trilemma” – though welcome in itself, is likewise marred by an un-biographical attention for its cogency today.

229 “*Each merits brief comment.*”

— One of the three items in view here, presented under the heading “Other wartime projects”, is *The Abolition of Man*. The very few things McGrath says about it serve to raise a suspicion that he hasn’t read it. In the context of an allegedly full-scale biography of C. S. Lewis focusing (as announced in the Preface) on his “ideas”, to assert that *The Abolition of Man* “merits brief comment” must be considered a grave mistake and a distortion of his legacy.

230 “*Lewis argues that this is unacceptable.*”

— This unacceptable approach (“twisting” the work into a shape the poet never intended”) is actually the one adopted in parts of this biography.

231 “*Lewis argues ... that a waterfall can be objectively pretty*”

— The “brief comment” on *The Abolition of Man* is perhaps as shoddy and misguided as could be achieved in half a page. In Lewis’s book the waterfall is argued to

be objectively *sublime* against any subjective experience of mere prettiness, as every moderately attentive reader of the book's first page knows. Further, the imprecise dating ("two years" after the Ballard Matthews Lectures), and the observations that *The Abolition* is "remarkable" and "now considered a difficult book", and "its arguments remain highly significant", strongly suggest, even while it is hard to believe, that McGrath either doesn't understand the book or never spent more than a few moments on it. We do not get the faintest idea why the book is called *The Abolition of Man*. It was one of Lewis's favourites among his own works, and perhaps also Barfield's.

232 "*much criticized by Catholic theologians ... Indeed, The Great Divorce is clearly best regarded as ...*"

— The reference is to Joseph Pearce, but Pearce neither mentions any theologians nor is one himself. The proposed way to regard *The Great Divorce* is in fact proposed by Pearce. The emphatic and important presence of Macdonald in this book is ignored, like the *Macdonald Anthology* published in the same year.

233 "*The Ransom Trilogy*"

— The trilogy is discussed in five pages, introduced by the suggestion that its chief importance is in the light they throw on Lewis as the future creator of Narnia. This is further stressed on p. 235: "the main thing to appreciate is ... the medium" and p. 237: "Yet in the end, it is the medium as much as the substance that really matters." Yet *Perelandra* was Lewis's favourite among his own books before he wrote *Till We Have Faces*.

233 "*The shift to fiction*"

— The idea of such a shift appears to be a biographical construct rather than something emerging from the relevant evidence. If a shift of the sort ever took place in Lewis, it was a shift *to apologetics* in 1939. Every step he took in that direction, or on that path, was made at the invitation of someone else: Ashley Sampson (*PoP*), James Welch (radio talks), Stella Aldwinckle (Socratic Club), W.R. Matthews (RAF lectures), Dorothy Sayers (*Miracles*). Left to himself, Lewis was ever quick to plump for "fiction", i.e. imaginative work or poetry. See Lewis's letter of October 1954 (*CL* III, 516): "the imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic." An imperfect glimpse of this truth is offered on page 255: "Lewis was [in 1948] already persuaded of the importance of the use of narrative and the appeal to the imagination in apologetics". Better still, on page 258: "Did Lewis see apologetics as an important episode in his career, rather than as its goal and zenith?" However, for most readers this will hardly tell against strong and systematic suggestions such as the one on p. 232: "a highly significant theme began to emerge – the capacity of imaginative narrative to embody and communicate truth." In reality, this "theme" never "emerged" since it was never subdued. In one way or another, Lewis always knew of this "capacity" ever since 1916 when he read Macdonald, or at the latest 1935 when he read Lindsay (233).

235 “*the ‘scientism’ of Lewis’s day*”

— The examples given of why Lewis rejected scientism are Eugenics and Vivisection. These are good examples, but no attempt is made to convey the key philosophical point here, if only to compensate for the poor treatment of *The Abolition of Man*.

235 “*the form of social Darwinism advocated by Haldane*”

— But scientific manipulation is not social Darwinism; and this term was already out of favour by the time of Haldane and Lewis.

241 “*Lewis was famous – he should have been happy*” etc.

— An embarrassing passage; it seems intended either for children or for very silly adults.

250 “*Elizabeth Anscombe and the Socratic Club*” (section heading)

— No mention of the Socratic Club has been made so far, although we are now in the chapter on “Postwar Tensions and Problems” and have reached the early 1950s. The Club was actually founded in January 1942; chapter 8, “The Wartime Apologist”, is incomplete without it; at the very least it should have been mentioned in the section “Other Wartime Projects” in chapter 9. Instead, the Socratic Club is treated as a detail of the Anscombe affair. In the Timetable, too, the Club is only mentioned as an adjunct to Anscombe (p. 384). This is to misrepresent both Anscombe’s and the Club’s role in Lewis’s life and work, and Lewis’s role in Oxford.

252f “*the third chapter of Miracles*”

— The rest of *Miracles* is never discussed, but even this chapter is very imperfectly summarized:

* In this early part of his book Lewis is not answering any critics of “Christian beliefs”; his real concern (as McGrath points out a few lines down) is over “all human thought”.

* McGrath’s “accident of the environment” is a needlessly loose rendering of Lewis’s words about naturalism as “the whole show”.

* Lewis’s positive conclusion – “the validity of thought is central” – is omitted altogether.

* To suggest that the chapter might have been written “in some haste” (253) is improper in light of the obvious hastiness of the present analysis. It actually took Lewis a comparatively long time to write *Miracles*.

254 “*The real significance of this slightly bruising encounter with Anscombe concerns its interpretation for the future direction of Lewis’s writing projects.*”

— The phrasing is vague (“the significance concerns”; “interpretation for the direction”). Apart from that, to say that this is “the real significance” is to ignore Lewis’s insistence, over the years, on the importance of his “argument from reason”.

260 “*while he had done what he could ‘in the way of frontal attacks,’ he now felt ‘quite sure’ those days were over.*”

— Though McGrath does not include it in his quotation from a 1955 letter to Carl Henry, Lewis indeed literally wrote “I have done what I could”. His decision to make

no further attempts at rational defence of the faith seems to have been inspired partly by a simple idea, after finishing *Miracles* in 1945, that this was his final word in philosophical apologetics (shortly after he had finished writing the book, his essayistic writing shows a turning away from this sort of subject); and partly by developments in the field of academic philosophy for which he had neither time nor interest. He had a profound distrust of philosophical fads in general and perhaps of analytical philosophy in particular. Gilbert Ryle's succession to Magdalen's Waynflete chair in 1945 must have been an ominous and depressing event for Lewis. For McGrath, the supposed "shift to fiction" is a matter of Lewis maturing from a merely modern apologist into one who could survive into postmodern times.

260 *"We must now tell the story of how Lewis wrote the Chronicles of Narnia, and try to understand why they have captivated the imagination of a generation."*

— This is bombastic and imprecise: which generation? Surely more than one. The reader wonders what kind of obligation is expressed by the words "We must". In the opening paragraph of the Preface, Narnia and Tolkien are mentioned as themes which "alone" make "the story of C. S. Lewis ... worth telling" (x), but it is also clearly suggested there that this biography will be comprehensive since "there is far more to C. S. Lewis than this" (x). The book's endpapers, featuring maps of Narnia, suggest that posthumous developments have nevertheless been allowed a strong influence on the picture presented here of Lewis's life and work. This approach is technically Wilsonian: biography is sacrificed to the supposed need to comment on "the Lewis phenomenon", defined in posthumous terms. Although McGrath is usually free from any Wilsonian malice toward his subject, the combined bias toward the themes of Narnia and Tolkien raises a suspicion that the biographer's task has been neglected at the call of the bandwagon of ready-made world fame.

267 *"Lewis's long-term fascination with the distinction between the 'exterior world' and the 'interior world'"*

— Elsewhere in the book, references to this supposed fascination usually employ the words *external* and *internal* rather than *exterior* and *interior*. No examples are given. It seems to be another biographical construct, projected on Lewis's own thought.

268 *"a quest for meaning and virtue, not simply the quest for explanation and understanding ... perhaps one reason [for the] powerful appeal ... they speak of choices to be made, of right and wrong" etc.*

— Certainly so; and it serves to show why George Macdonald must figure prominently in almost any sort of account of C. S. Lewis.

269 *"The idea of a threshold to strange worlds is a familiar theme in children's literature, past and present."*

— Lewis would have preferred to point out that it is a familiar theme in "romance" or perhaps "fantastic" literature; cf. his curious reference to *The Lord of the Rings* as a "romantic trilogy" (351).

276 “*the ‘bestiaries’ of the Middle Ages*”

— No reference is given to studies about this suggested background. The bestiaries’ “witness to the complex interdependency of the natural world” was surely nothing as compared with the witness given by Darwin and would hardly be relevant as a critique of Darwinism.

276 “*inversion of Darwinian hierarchies*”

— But Darwinism does not actually propose *any* hierarchy. Perhaps what is meant is “Social Darwinism”. What is inverted, if there is an inversion, would rather seem to be a Christian hierarchy, viz. “the primacy of humans over animals”.

277 “*For Lewis, the narrative of Narnia has the capacity to re-enchant*” etc.

— In what sense “for Lewis”? An altogether vaguely phrased passage.

279 “*Lewis may also have come to realize the power of myth through reading G. K. Chesterton ...*”

— It is almost incredible that Lewis’s preface to the *Macdonald Anthology* should have been ignored here. In any case both this chapter and (especially) the next – i.e. Part III of this biography – cannot properly be called biography.

281 “*... began to grasp the explanatory and imaginative power of an incarnational faith ... its literary vision ... not so much by the arguments in its favour, but by its compelling vision*” etc.

— The picture presented both of Lewis and of the Narnia books gets reduced to things which McGrath thinks most commendable in Lewis and in these books. There is nothing here to remind us “of choices to be made, of right and wrong” in Narnia, or that Aslan is “not a *tame* lion”; the latter point is briefly mentioned in the next chapter, p. 288, as a development of Aslan’s awe-inspiring quality. As in the account of *Mere Christianity*, a rather toothless “vision” thing is paramount, and tailored to postmodern likes and dislikes; the ghost of Macdonald seems quite exorcised. Meanwhile the brief reference to the Incarnation is one of only very few ones in the book.

287 “*So let us enter the world of [LWW] ... And where better to begin than with its central character, the magnificent lion Aslan?*”

— Almost all of this is not biography but sheer popular Narniology, if not Narniolatry, of which there is already a glut on the market. The general biographer’s job here, i.e. the proper way to make himself useful, would be to show that there is more to Lewis than Narnia (as suggested in the Preface). No one is helped by a confirmation of widespread caricatures.

288 “*Otto’s classic religious work ... one of the most important books he had ever read*”

— This is very probably an exaggeration. In addition to the 1962 list Lewis only mentioned it in a letter of 1958 (*CL* III, 978) and in “Cross-Examination” (1963). This is not to deny its importance; but books like Balfour’s *Theism and Humanism* and Bevan’s *Symbolism and Belief* are parallel cases of inconspicuous importance for the development and nature of Lewis’s thought.

- 295/296 “*But where do these ideas come from? They are all derived from the writings of the Middle Ages – not works of academic theology*” / “*the great medieval popular religious writings which Lewis so admired and enjoyed.*”
 — Even apart from false and un-Lewisian suggested opposites, all this seems exaggerated, simplistic, childish.
- 298 “*Spenser’s Faerie Queen[e] has seven books*”
 — This idea does not seem worth committing to paper. *FQ* was planned to be a work in twelve books; the unfinished work as handed down has the first six books and parts of the seventh.
- 301 “*to help his audience to understand his point*”
 — Prince Rilian has no “audience” except the White Witch: and she is not an audience in the sense of someone who has any wish to understand him. Presumably she understands him perfectly well, but her business is to bewitch him. It is hardly a situation that lends itself for drawing apologetic lessons.
- 303 “*there is a problem here ... a double leap of the imagination*”
 — True, of course; but this is only natural for a writer who died half a century ago. The biographer’s task is not so much to state this problem as to provide the materials for a solution. As A. N. Wilson often slipped into the role of novelist, so McGrath often slips into the role of a postmodern apologist for the modern apologist, each forgetting that their job was biography. – Meanwhile, although the book promises to tell us about Lewis as an “eccentric genius”, we never in fact hear much about this really interesting thing about him – how he was a misfit in his *own* time and circumstances as much as in ours, and how this might be a pointer to his enduring appeal.
- 305 “*the stories of Narnia ... tend to privilege male agents.*”
 — The meaning of “privilege” is not quite clear. Among the counterexamples in this question, Edmund (the *male* ‘first sinner’ in Narnia) and Eustace are conspicuously absent. In any case, the amount of space devoted to complaints about Lewis’s supposed misogyny had better be strictly rationed. There are many more interesting or important ways for a biographer to highlight the way Lewis went against the grain of both his and our time.
- 310 “*at least a partial recovery ... Lewis remained imaginatively becalmed for some time. ... English Literature ... was a substantial work of literary scholarship, rather than a creative original composition.*”
 — No attempt is made to combine such views with the fact that Lewis was writing the first few Narnia tales in this period. Also, from the way the OHEL volume is dispatched in a few lines, the uninformed reader may conclude the book is hardly worth reading and wasn’t perhaps worth writing. In reality it a masterpiece, as riveting as anything Lewis wrote. “Creative” and “original” are not how Lewis would have wished to see any of his works described.
- 315 “*Might Lewis’s shyness have been misunderstood as aggressiveness?*”
 — A mysterious remark.

316 “*Lewis’s theme was the periodization of literary history*”

— It was not. He was talking of *general* history. The words *literature* and *literary* are hardly used and the term *literary history* makes just a single appearance in the lecture (third paragraph). Literary history is one minor aspect of his real theme, which is the relation of historical change to historical continuity.

316 “*This, he suggested, was a myth*”

— But Lewis was too keen on a proper use of the word *myth* to use it that way.

317-20 “*It is significant that Lewis’s lecture was primarily on the topic of ‘Renaissance’.*”
etc.

— He was acceding to a chair of Medieval and Renaissance English: there would seem to be nothing obviously significant or even mildly remarkable in his choosing such a topic. But then it clearly wasn’t his topic. After an introductory assertion that the Renaissance will not do as a significant historical “divide”, he goes on to discuss “rival claims” to that position. This discussion of a series of candidates, leading up to the presentation of what Lewis considers a successful rival claim, is his theme or topic. The radio version was actually called “The Great Divide.” – McGrath appears to have seen the term “Renaissance” as a springboard for speculations about some sense of *personal rebirth* which Lewis was expressing. This psychologizing approach is uncannily reminiscent of Wilson’s treatment of the Cambridge lecture. That approach is equally vexing in light of the obvious failure to notice Lewis’s plain meaning and chief concern (as expressed in the sentence beginning “It is my settled conviction ...” in Lewis’s final paragraph). A section about Lewis’s inaugural lecture would seem to be the obvious place to deal with his “dinosaurian” status in his own day, the mid-twentieth century; but this theme remains sadly under-discussed. In both places where it does seem to emerge, McGrath is off-target. (1) “Chronological snobbery” is mentioned (318) as if that term and issue appear in the lecture, which they don’t. The issue of *snobbery* is quite different from the issue of historical dividing lines and how to identify and perhaps bridge or cross them. (2) The dinosaurian quality is suggested to lie in a difference of scholarly habits between Lewis’s day and our day; the idea for this interpretation appears to have been inspired by Keith Thomas’s use of the word “dinosaur” in his lament over present-day methods. But surely Lewis was not talking about that, in any case he was not (of course) comparing his time to ours. McGrath: “In speaking of himself as a ‘dinosaur’, was Lewis referring to his research methods, and not merely their outcomes?” (319-320) The answer is: neither. This discussion of the Cambridge lecture is off-target from beginning to end. The *Timetable*, p. 384, doesn’t mention it, though it does mention Lewis’s accepting the position earlier that year. The Preface (xii-xiii) very briefly does indeed link this lecture to the theme of eccentricity, but then only describes it as a “distance from the prevailing academic trends of his day”, and still ignores the evident theme of a “Great Divide”.

321 “*the impact that Lewis had upon a specific audience ... intelligent, literary women*”

— No further details are given about this impact; we don’t learn what sort of difference between male and female is in view here. No source is mentioned to help us

find this out. Doubtless Ruth Pitter's response to Lewis, as described, had many a close parallel in male responses. She couldn't help that all the circumstances make her seem such an ideal candidate for becoming Lewis's wife. Nor does Joy Davidman's unscrupulous character bear any necessary relation to her being a woman or to any specific feminine response to Lewis. See also p. 324: "She [Pitter] kept writing to him. And he kept replying." This is highly suggestive, but of course many correspondents male and female kept writing to Lewis while he kept replying.

321 *"Lewis accorded her the rare honour of allowing her to address him as 'Jack' in her letters."*

— No attempt is made to make plausible from the sources that this is how it happened, or that either party considered it to be rare or an honour. We only know that after more than seven years of correspondence with Pitter, Lewis in his letter of 1 October 1953 first addressed her as "Dear Ruth". Presumably it was Pitter who proposed the change.

323 *"Davidman's younger son, Douglas Gresham, declared that his mother had gone to England with one specific intention: 'to seduce C. S. Lewis.'"*

— Gresham was remembering his mother's words while she obviously wasn't quite in earnest. The error is discussed by Gina Dalfonzo in a *Christianity Today* article posted on 8 October 2013, "[C. S. Lewis's Joy in Marriage: What I think Alister McGrath got wrong about Lewis's wife, Joy Davidman](#)"; she also discusses in a more general way the almost preternaturally black picture of Davidman presented in this biography.

325 *"... who delivered this maiden from the clutches of her evil husband in a noble act of courtly love?"*

— "Maiden" should be "lady", because (1) courtly lovers, as Lewis described them, were usually courting married ladies rather than maidens; (2) maidens have no husbands; (3) Joy Davidman was not a maiden.

327 *"he had hired Spencer Curtis Brown ... Did Lewis suddenly realise he needed a greater income?"*

— But this was February 1955, when his salary had just tripled (312).

332 *"By early October 1955, [Lewis] had reluctantly agreed to install Davidman and her two sons at The Kilns."*

— It would be interesting to know the origin of this assertion. No source is mentioned. Although "agree too install" is ambiguous, it is impossible that Lewis should have agreed to anything of the sort at that date. They were still absolutely unmarried and her cancer was not discovered until a year later. See Lyle Dorsett, p. 122, "By fall 1956 gossip was growing about Jack's frequent visits to 10, Old High Street." Possibly Joy settled at The Kilns in late December 1956, but to go by this biography, her only certain settling there happened after their clandestine religious marriage in hospital in March 1957, with no other prospect than her imminent death. See p. 338, "Davidman returned home to The Kilns in April [1957] in the expectation of dying within weeks": *returned home to The Kilns* is ambiguous.

- 331 *“Shadowlands”*
 — Romanticising is really only part of the problem, and not the difficult part. Another and more insidious theme is of Wilsonian descent: the collapse of Lewis’s theological “house of cards”. Lewis is presented as a man who delights in easy successes with large audiences of adoring old ladies, several years after the war; most of the reality of his career as a speaker is to be sought in RAF bases in wartime.
- 331 *“Shelburne ... clearly well regarded by Lewis”*
 — She clearly was not. See his letter of 17 February 1961, *CL* III, p. 1240.
- 344 *“in The Problem of Pain ... the existence of pain is presented as an intellectual puzzle which Christian theology is able to frame satisfactorily, if not entirely to resolve.”*
 — Lewis wrote (*PoP*, ch. 1), “In a sense, [Christianity] creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain.” He appears to mean an intellectual sense. To render “creates” as “is able to frame satisfactorily” is hardly elucidating.
- 345 *“the cool, logical approach to faith”*
 — Presumably what is meant is “cool, logical approach to pain”, or else “cool, logical faith”.
- 352 *“...continued admiration and respect for his friend’s work, despite their increasing personal distance.”*
 — Cf. 199, note 11: “...written at a time when Tolkien’s friendship with Lewis had cooled, giving added significance to his warm commendations.” In spite of Lewis’s foolish action regarding the Adam Fox affair (180-181), the very idea of such childish attitudes on such weighty occasions is probably a distortion.
- 363 *“Lewis’s hour now seemed to lie in the past.”*
 — But the really interesting thing about “Lewis’s hour” is that it had *always* seemed to lie in the past. McGrath’s treatment of the Cambridge inaugural lecture suggests he tends to ignore this deeply characteristic feature of Lewis’s life and work – i.e. of the *historical* “Lewis phenomenon”. Perhaps because of this blind spot, McGrath appears to be unduly impressed by the latest shift in cultural climate – from modern to post-modern (cf. 374, “Nobody knows when modernity finally lost out to postmodernity in the United States”). The importance attached to it here effectively blurs the line drawn by Lewis between Modern (conquest of nature, endless “progress” without standards, the chimera of “new values”, simultaneous bloating and shrinking of the human Self, etc.) and Premodern (hierarchy in nature and beyond, timeless values, ideals of self-conquest, self-denial, sense of sin, etc.). To assume, implicitly, that this line has now faded or lost importance is to blur the reader’s view of Lewis. Questions of his roots in the mid-twentieth-century British middle class and obsolete gender roles are trivial in comparison.
- 364-5 [*Chad Walsh’s hunch about whether and how Lewis was to live on after 1963*]
 — This is how Walsh wrote in his 1965 essay “Impact on America” (as McGrath reminds us again on p. 376). However, when Walsh expressed the same view in “The Man and the Mystery” (1969), he added another interesting “hunch”, linking Lewis’s

potential meaning for posterity with Lewis's radical anti-subjectivism and, in that sense, with his eccentricity both in his own day and in the foreseeable future.

366 "*Lewis was a distinctly religious voice in a coming secular age, and more importantly, he advocated taking the past seriously ...*"

— This comes close to a properly Lewisian view of Lewis; but it is a sadly brief passage, and still remains really off the mark:

* Lewis also understood himself as what may be called "a *human* voice in an *inhuman* age"; and whether or not this view was entirely correct, the way he expressed it fully bears comparison with George Orwell's way and is certainly more timeless due to his uniquely deep awareness of the human past.

* Lewis considered the secular age not as a coming thing but as one that *had* come in the nineteenth century. Had he lived to see developments after 1963, including the advent of postmodernism, it might not have made much of a difference to him; they do not appear to have invalidated much of his work. His view of modernity as a deviation from humanity remains interesting and important as ever, and his insistence on the arguments from reason and morality remain relevant.

* To spend much energy on matters such as Lewis's supposed misogyny in modern eyes may be commendable with a view to the facts of today's culture. Yet, even with the best of intentions, it is not the way to convey a positive idea of Lewis's life and work.

375 "*Lewis is seen to enrich and extend faith, without diluting it.*"

— The inevitable question here is whether McGrath's account of Lewis is not itself a dilution. The uninformed reader would hardly guess from this biography how Lewis himself envisaged the enrichment and extension of faith (from a letter to Mary Margaret McCaslin, 15 November 1956):

... You have made a great sacrifice for conscience' sake. Such things, we may be sure, enrich one: but God knows it doesn't *feel* like it at the time. It did not, even for Our Lord Himself, in Gethsemane. I always try to remember what Macdonald said "The Son of God died not that we might not suffer but that our sufferings might become like His."

The Macdonald quote served Lewis as the epigraph for his first apologetic book, *The Problem of Pain*, in 1940. As a result it also appears on p. 202 of this biography, along with one of McGrath's very few references to the Incarnation, in the section where that book is discussed. It is a happy moment of fidelity to the spirit of the Lewisian original; but as such it is too rare.

Subtitle "*Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*"

— These terms seems to have been chosen as soundbites rather than as descriptions either of Lewis, or even of the way he is presented in this book.

* The *eccentricity* is hardly developed in its most obvious aspect: Lewis's "dinosaurian" status as a pre-modern man in modern times; cf. David Lake's comment, "C. S. Lewis is a unique figure ... and we had no right to hope for such an author to appear in the 20th century" (article on Lewis in *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers*, 2nd ed., 1986, pp. 444-447). Instead, in so far as the idea of eccentricity is

developed, it is constantly confused with or eclipsed by the general problem that a writer may lose some of his immediate relevance or accessibility half a century after his death.

* The notion of *reluctance* seems to be on loan from Lewis's self-description as a reluctant *convert*. There is no other way to account for it; the conflation with prophethood appears to be a confusion. In so far as Lewis's prophethood is to be equated with his championship for Christianity, his real attitude was described at one critical point as "diffident of himself but keen to try" (Charles Gilmore on Lewis being invited to speak to the RAF; Green & Hooper's biography, 2002 ed., p. 243; also in *Collected Letters* II, 472). His attitude as the Socratic Club's president has been described by witnesses as far from reluctant.

* In the rest of the book after the explanation of this subtitle in the Preface (pp. xii-xiii), the word *reluctant* (or derived forms) in fact makes no more appearances in the intended sense or context; the word *eccentric* hardly appears at all (the only instance is on p. 267). The term *genius* as applied to Lewis appears twice, in the combinations *creative genius* (266) and *imaginative genius* (300); *prophet* has two relevant but very different and barely developed instances (236, 244).

* The subtitle was extended after a few months by *The Story of the Man Who Created Narnia*.

2. OBSCURITIES, GAPS, QUESTIONABLE USE OF SOURCES

14 "*Warren Lewis later reflected ...*"

— Warnie's "Memoir" as published is a heavily edited version of his original text. The bits always quoted – about the "unattainable hills" and how they may have prompted (as McGrath says) "his brother's imaginative wanderings" – are sheer fabrication by Christopher Derrick, who edited Warnie's "Biography" for publication as *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (1966, expanded version edited by Walter Hooper in 1988). Warnie, in his own undoctored text, is only talking of their early years and does not explicitly suggest any anticipations of his brother's later fame as an imaginative writer.

47 "*went back to Oxford to sit for his additional examination*"

— We don't hear whether Lewis actually sat for this examination or what the result was. It is unclear whether this was "Responsions" or anything to do with the notorious mathematics test. See also pp. 52 and 54.

52f [*Lewis in the OTC*]

— He applied for the university's Officer's Training Corps on 25 April 1917 (p. 53), "went up to University College" on 29 April (p. 52), and was accepted in the OTC five days after applying (p. 53), i.e. on 30 April. The end date of his OTC period appears to be 7 May (p. 56), so his membership apparently lasted just one week. McGrath says Lewis was an OTC member "for only a few weeks" and on 7 May "began training as a potential infantry officer in the British Army" while being transferred to "E Company"

and Keble College (56). We don't learn what sort of training the OTC offered although it was suggested to Lewis on arrival that the training would take up all his time (53-54). Meanwhile (p. 58, note 25) a letter of 13 May is quoted as if written when Lewis was still in the OTC and at University College; and a letter of 10? June is cited as written "a few days after joining the battalion", but he still appears to live at Univ. during weekends. Only gradually and implicitly does it become clear (e.g. in the caption to photo 4.1 on p. 81) that Lewis somehow always retained his rooms at University College ever since his arrival in April 1917, or at least retained some sort of connection to them.

- 66 *"It was during this visit to Bristol that Maureen Moore overheard Lewis ..."*
— No source is mentioned, nor has "this visit" been mentioned; it may be guessed that the visit in question was mentioned in Mrs Moore's letter of 17 October 1917 (note 52).
- 102 *Ch. 4, note 48, "For the full text of the 'Great War' letters ... see ..."*
— A reference to "Great War" manuscripts certainly should include Lewis's *Summae* and the sequels which he and Barfield wrote in the late 1920s. It should also be pointed out that no compilation of documents from this episode can be "full" without Barfield's contributions.
- 103 *"Lewis had been influenced by what he styled the 'New Look', a rationalist way of thinking"*
— This is a shoddy rendering of the only relevant source: Lewis's own words (*SbJ* ch. 13, "The New Look"): "I was busily engaged ... in assuming what we may call an intellectual 'New Look'."
- 103 *"Lewis was relying on precisely the same inner patterns of thought that he had dismissed in order to secure his knowledge of an allegedly 'objective' world"*
— An abstruse way to express a view which is itself seems to (con)fuse several strands in the story of Lewis's philosophical key thoughts. "Patterns" is an unhelpful abstraction, discouraging any real thinking of the sort encouraged by Lewis, while the mysterious suggestion of an "inner" quality only makes matters worse. No reader will be enlightened by this comment; many readers will readily give up hopes of understanding the matter. It would have been interesting to know precisely what Barfield contributed to Lewis' "argument from reason", but it is impossible to learn it from this.
- 107 *"Nothing came of the hoax."*
— The reader is left to guess in what sense "nothing came" of it. There are several possibilities and they make a good deal of difference.
- 107 *"It seems fair to suggest that its [Dymer's] failure marked the end of Lewis's dreams" etc.*
— But this need not merely be *suggested*. Lewis made it as explicit as any failed poet ever did. He wrote a memorandum analysing his shattered dream at great length on 6 March 1926 and sent it to Arthur Greeves on 18 August 1930.

- 146 “... *this conversion had nothing to do with*” etc.
 — But exactly *which* conversion? The one to Theism or the one to Christianity? This seems clear at first, but the paragraph as a whole leaves the reader completely in doubt.
- 150 “*what Lewis later termed ‘a real though unfocused gleam ...’*” etc.
 — For Lewis’s own mature thoughts on myth, there is no source like his preface to the *Macdonald Anthology*: but this is one of Lewis’s books which seem to have escaped McGrath’s attention, barring one end note (p. 348, note 16).
- 173 “*If a man diligently followed this desire ...*” etc.
 — The quote from the 1943 preface to *Pilgrim’s Regress* is presented as beginning with a new sentence. It is in fact preceded by a significant clause: “It appeared to me therefore that if a man diligently ...” etc. – Lewis was thus relegating the idea in question to a past episode of his own development; he was not advancing a timeless and quasi-syllogistic “argument from desire”.
- 197 “The Problem of Pain, *which he had begun to draft around this time*”
 — Immediately before the section on *The Problem of Pain* starting on p. 200, the reader is invited to wonder “how did it come to be written?” The answer is both easy and important, but it is never given. Instead, McGrath has just spent several pages on how *The Hobbit* came to be written. We never learn that Lewis wrote his first work of apologetics at the request of the publisher, Ashley Sampson (whose name is mentioned only once, on p. 217, coming out of the blue and not included in the index). Mentioning Sampson’s role would have provided a perfect parallel to the quote about the *Broadcast Talks* on p. 212: “I gave these talks ... because I was asked to do so.” This would have been important with a view to the question of a supposed “shift to fiction”.
- 207 “*speaking at Royal Air Force (RAF) stations*”
 — No source is given for the passage on how Lewis got this job. Hooper’s account in *Collected Letters II*, 471-472 could have been quoted.
- 216 “*thirty-one ‘Screwtape Letters’ – one for each day of the month*”
 — The reference to the days of the month is mysterious.
- 225 “*the capacity of Christianity to ‘fit in’ what we observe and experience ... Christianity provides a map that is found to ‘fit in’ well with what we observe*”
 — The notion of “fitting in (with)” is used in incongruous ways within one short paragraph. Such imprecision is unthinkable in Lewis’s own writing. In writing about Lewis, more awareness of the virtues of precise language is required simply as a way to do him justice.
- 234 “*Haldane ... was a disillusioned Marxist*”
 — He was not quite disillusioned until after the Second World War, and certainly not in the days here referred to, around 1930. Haldane never “transferred” his crusading temperament from Marxism to scientism, since the two went together: he was involved in a 1940 propaganda film for Russian science about a dog’s severed head

which was purportedly kept alive. Also, he was a great scientist, a very learned and versatile man, and an excellent and energetic populariser. Like Lewis he obtained a First in Greats at Oxford and served in the war, before finding his true vocation (in his case, biology); as it happens he was also nicknamed Jack. In other words, various interesting and relevant things might be said about him which would have the advantage of being true.

236 “*Lewis’s essay ‘Vivisection’ remains one of the most intellectually significant critiques of vivisection.*”

— That is a big statement, without reference to sources that may help the reader to check it. Very few readers will notice Andrew Linzey’s work, mentioned in the bibliography on p. 396.

241 “*One broadside ... from an obscure American Episcopalian theologian, Norman Pittenger*”

— This broadside ought to have been mentioned in a note, especially in view of the easy sort of mockery made here of Pittenger. Since this passage appears in the chapter on the years 1945-54, it is strange to note that the only critique at all likely to be known to readers dates from 1 October 1958, with Lewis’s “Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger” following the next month.

243 “*his negative attitude towards higher degrees*”

— This is obscure until the end of the paragraph, p. 245. Even there, one wonders if the problem is correctly stated as “his negative attitude towards higher degrees”. His lack of “enthusiasm” is mentioned on p. 244 but never explained.

255 “*As Lewis once remarked, the Ransom Trilogy, like Narnia, had its origins in images rather than ideas.*”

— This requires a reference, presumably to two mentions of the floating islands in *Perelandra* (letter, 31 Jan. 1952; “Unreal Estates”, 1962).

256 “*Lewis was writing about Narnia before Anscombe’s 1948 presentation.*”

— The only potential source to be found for this statement is mentioned in the next chapter, p. 265, with note 7 referring to an oral testimony. It says nothing about Narnia.

259 “*In June 1949, Lewis suffered a breakdown*” etc.

— 13 June was given as the precise date on p. 246. The Irish photo on p. 257 is dated “summer 1949”, but this seems hard to combine with what we read about that summer, especially on p. 246: Lewis indeed *planned* a trip to Ireland, but cancelled it. Page 248 suggests an improvement in Lewis’s condition in the course of 1951 after the death of Mrs Moore in January of that year, on p. 259 we have “late 1951” as the date when Lewis “began to regain something of his confidence and motivation”. But in this very period he had written his first few Narnian books.

264 “*Lewis did not really see himself as ‘creating’ Narnia.*”

— True, but then a few lines further on it is suggested that “he wove them together to create the literary landmark that we know as the Chronicles of Narnia.” Also, in view

of the dominant role played by Tolkien in this biography it is surprising that no reference is made to the idea of “subcreation” (all too briefly mentioned on pp. 199-200).

271 “*Her [Pauline Baynes’s] diary entry for that day was rumoured to read ...*”

— In biography, a rumour must not be mentioned without at least one person known to have spread it.

288 “*The name Aslan is particularly significant in Ottoman colonial history. Until the end of the First World War ...*” etc.

— At the end of this paragraph, the question why Lewis chose the Turkish word for *lion* remains where it was at the beginning. Likely enough he encountered the word in some literary source which may be called “Ottoman”, in the way Lewis’s works are British and Cicero’s are Roman. But his choice for that name is in not (or not here) “explained” by an “Ottoman lineage”, let alone by being (in an unspecified way) “significant in Ottoman colonial history”. An additional enigma is why that history should be called “colonial”.

299 “*the ‘Civil War’ in Lewis’s own ‘Outline of Narnian History’*”

— A mysterious document; no source is stated.

300 “*bright shadow*”

— A cross-reference to p. 42 ought to have been given. The lack of any reference is in line with this book’s general lack of attention for George Macdonald.

314 “*His allies within the college*”

— One wonders who they were. Lewis by that time seemed to have no allies at Magdalen College.

314-315 “*Richard Ladborough*”

— No source given.

316 *Note 23: an unpublished source at Wheaton for Barbara Reynolds’s account of Lewis’s inaugural lecture.*

— The account has in fact been published in her edition of the letters of Dorothy L. Sayers.

316 *Note 24*

— The source mentioned dates from 3 March 1945: it can’t refer to an event after 29 November 1954, unless 1945 is a misprint for 1955 or some later year.

320 “*the 1960 debate with F. R. Leavis over the merits of literary criticism*”

— “Merits” seems the wrong word; but no source is mentioned for more information on that particular debate.

320 “*By my reckoning ... thirteen books and forty-four articles ... three collections of essays.*”

— That seems an exaggeration, but the method of reckoning must remain a mystery without further explanation.

326 “in 1955 ... she and her sons moved into a three-bedroom house ... in Headington, not far from *The Kilns*.”

— Some preciser date would be welcome (and possible: Lyle Dorsett in his book on *Joy and CSL*, p. 111, says it is August). As it is, the reader is needlessly kept in the dark in such places as p. 329, “in March 1955, Davidman came to stay at *The Kilns*.” Nor is it clear (it is just barely suggested on p. 325) where she and her sons had lived since their arrival in England in November 1953 (in London, says Dorsett).

330 “a September 1955 visit to his confidant Arthur Greeves”

— The source for this is a short letter dating from “a month after the visit” (i.e. 30 October 1955, mentioned in note 49). The seemingly quoted words “legal formality” do not appear there. Since Lewis had obviously been accused by Greeves of a “false position”, it makes little sense to suggest, as McGrath does, that he was “defensive about the idea of a civil marriage to Davidman”. Anyone accused of a false position will as a rule be “defensive” as long as the slightest modification needs to be made to that accusation. McGrath’s paraphrase of the relevant passage in this brief letter is longer than the original and in effect obscures it: (1) Lewis doesn’t say that a church marriage is “out of the question” because “he held very traditional views of the matter”; he said that not marrying is an easy resolution “for one who doesn’t in the least want it!” (2) Where Lewis called the church marriage “from my point of view, adultery”, McGrath paraphrases this as “adulterous from a religious perspective”.

330 “24 April 1957”

— No mention is made of the fact that this date is exactly 1 year + 1 day after the civil marriage.

330 “To most of Lewis’s close friends it seemed clear that Davidman ...” etc.

— These are big statements without a trace of evidence; nor do we learn which friends were of this opinion and which were not. The same is true for the starkly repelling picture given of Davidman on p. 332, third paragraph. The nadir is reached on p. 333 where a passage is quoted from an entirely fictitious conversation in Wilson’s book (note 56). George Sayer, in an otherwise extremely generous review of Wilson (“C.S. Lewis and Adultery”, *Crisis*, November 1990, reprinted in *Canadian CSL Journal*, Spring 1991, p. 15), has explicitly denounced this passage. Referring to “Lady Dunbar, with whom I have discussed it” and “who agrees that this is an inaccurate account”, Sayer writes, with reference to this passage: “there is one occasion when, with the novelist in charge, he [Wilson] makes her [Davidman] out to be cruder and more preemptory than she was.” Nor does McGrath point out that this conversation (i.e. the original, of which Wilson’s account was a gross case of maliciously careless embroidering) took place while Davidman was recovering from a series of three surgical operations she underwent in November 1956: it was the around the date (24 December 1956, as mentioned on p. 334) when Lewis published a brief formal announcement of their civic marriage performed nine months earlier. This makes a lot of difference for any evaluation of both her and Lewis’s “motivations”: see p. 334, first sentence.

340 “*the Greece trip still went ahead.*⁷⁶”

— Note 76 says, “Full details in Green and Hooper”. This confirms the general sense of hurry in this last part of the book, although there is some justification here in the fact that Green could describe this trip as a participant.

348 *Ch. 14, note 16, “... to whom Lewis had dedicated his MacDonald anthology.”*

— In this whole biography, this end note is the only reference to Lewis’s chief tribute to his “master” and chief source of religious wisdom and inspiration.

348v “*Lewis’s failing health, 1961-1963*” (section heading)

— Not a word is said about *Letters to Malcolm, Studies in Words, They Asked for a Paper* and *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*.

367 “*Hooper ... served as Lewis’s literary executioner after the death of Cecil Harwood in 1975.*”

— True, but not as the only one. He succeeded to Harwood’s place beside Barfield as one of Lewis’s two literary executioners (cf. p. 348).

369 “*... followed by Jack (1988) by George Sayer*”

— Warnie’s *Letters* (1966, 1988) and Carpenter’s *Inklings* (1978) must not be ignored, nor perhaps Griffin’s book *C. S. Lewis: The Authentic Voice* (1986).

369 “*landmarks in Lewis studies*”

— For better or worse, Wilson’s is also a landmark.

377 “*Lewis’s current status ... Shadowlands ... 1998*” etc.

— Again, Wilson can’t be ignored. The distortions in *Shadowlands* are partly Wilson’s; so are some of the revisions of the DNB article on Lewis; and McGrath’s own book in several ways testifies to Wilson’s enduring influence. Also, for all his malice, sloppiness and vapidness, Wilson’s book unlike McGrath’s does contain some excellent passages, and has almost certainly helped to make Lewis more attractive and accessible in some quarters where he would else have remained a nonentity.

392 “*Lewis, W. H. ‘C. S. Lewis: A Biography’ (1974).*”

— The date cannot be correct in so far as an unpublished work cannot have originated after the author’s death: Warnie died in 1973. His *Letters* (1966), including his “Memoir”, was in fact an edited version of this “Biography”.

425 *Ch. 14, note 16: “Lucy Barfield was Owen Barfield’s adopted daughter.”*

— Is that true? Walter Hooper (*Companion & Guide*, 623) mentions her simply as the second of Barfield’s three children, born on 2 November 1935.

passim Double mentions or missing cross-references:

- * 6, 30, 266, Kirkpatrick’s dates and full names
- * 22 & 70, Barneval-le-Grand
- * 25 & 75, George Sayer’s dates
- * 44 & 65, military service in Ireland
- * 63 & 76, the name “Clive Hamilton”
- * 74 & 172, sonnet “Reason”

- * 225 & 277, quote from “Is Theology Poetry?”
- * 270 Macdonald’s dates only mentioned at a late stage

passim Books ignored or (very) inadequately discussed:

- * Ransom trilogy
- * *The Abolition of Man*
- * *George Macdonald: An Anthology*
- * *Miracles*
- * *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*
- * *Till We Have Faces*
- * *The Four Loves*
- * *Letters to Malcolm*
- * *Studies in Words*
- * *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (1966)

passim Important persons inadequately discussed or completely ignored:

- * George Macdonald
- * Owen Barfield
- * Cecil Harwood (dedicatee of *Miracles* and co-executioner of CSL’s last will)
- * Bede Griffiths (fellow convert, dedicatee of *Surprised by Joy* and recipient of many fine letters)
- * Charles Williams (CSL’s chief living inspiration during his most productive years)
- * Dorothy Sayers (major correspondent, fellow protagonist of the Christian revival of the 1940s, and a really reluctant prophet)
- * Sheldon Vanauken (important male correspondent, posthumous link between CSL and America)
- * Joy Davidman (sloppy research, bold statements)

3. INACCURACY

Some items in sections 3 and 4 are mentioned in passing in section 1 or 2

20 Note 32, “Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*”

— An unclear reference.

36 “H.M.A. Guerber”

— H.A. Guerber

58 “Theobold Butler”

— Theobald Butler

74 “*The sonnet titled ‘Reason’*”

— The poem is here dated to “probably the early 1920s”. It is mentioned again (without cross-reference) on p. 172, and there dated to “the 1920s”.

132 “*two cycles of poems*”

— in fact “two volumes of poetry”: one cycle and one long narrative poem.

- 204 “*In [October] 1941 Lewis wrote to Father Walter Adams*”
— In fact October 1940.
- 218 “*The Case for Christianity (1942)*”
— This is the title of the 1943 American edition of *Broadcast Talks* (1942).
- 219 “*one set of talks was omitted altogether*”
— Not true.
- 225 “his 1945 essay ‘Is Theology Poetry?’”
— Lewis read this paper to the Socratic Club on 6 November 1944.
- 227 “*The original form included discussion of other options*”
— It didn’t. On the contrary, this later edition (1952) has two additional paragraphs as compared with the earlier publication.
- 231 “*two years after giving the Ballard Matthews Lectures...*”
— In fact, barely fifteen months later: the time lapse was from early December 1941 to late February 1943.
- 248 “*difficult not to read*”
— “difficult to read”
- 252 “*Haldane, with whom Lewis crossed swords on several occasions*”
— In fact it appears there have been only two aborted attempts: one in the Socratic Club and one in a written polemic. Neither rose to the level of an actual exchange.
- 253 [Quote from Haldane]
— The quote is presented as if McGrath has dug it up; in fact it appears in *Miracles*.
- 259 “*On 12 June 1950, Stella Aldwinckle wrote to Lewis in her capacity as secretary of the Socratic Club*”
— That day it was Lewis who wrote to her. The *Collected Letters* do not mention a request or reminder from Aldwinckle, and she was the Club’s chairman, not secretary.
- 280 “*... than many supposedly factual works*”
— Indisputably, the correct word is not *factual* but *realistic*. Note 35 refers to *An Experiment in Criticism*, chapter 7, “On Realisms”. The word *factual* never appears in the whole of that book.
- 295 “*Aslan breaks down the castle gates ... through the shattered gates*”
— Actually he first jumps over the wall into the castle (ch. 15, penultimate sentence) and later leaves the castle “through the gap in the castle wall” (ch. 16, antepenultimate paragraph).
- 301 “*As the flames rise, they cast shadows on the walls of the cave.*”
— The shadows are, of course, not cast by the flames but by the *objects* between the flames and the cavedwellers. These objects are never mentioned here. This whole rendering of Plato’s story is sloppy and ineffective.

- 368 “Screwtape Proposes a Toast (1965); Of This and Other Worlds (1966)”
 — The first of these was not edited by Hooper. The second is not a 1966 title; the volume published that year was *Of Other Worlds*. The expanded title refers to an expanded edition published in 1982. The bibliography (p. 392) states neither of the two, giving instead the American title of the 1982 volume (*On Stories*).
- 369 “Roger L. Green ... studies of ... Lewis Carroll (1960)”
 — His book on Carroll did not appear in 1960 but in 1951 (or perhaps 1949).
- 397 “Phillips, Justin. C. S. Lewis in a Time of War”
 — This should be *C. S. Lewis at the BBC* (2002), mentioned in chapter 8, note 29.

4. WORDINESS AND SURFEIT OF DETAIL

- 17 On Gabbitas & Thring
- 31 On Kirkpatrick’s son
- 40 On Kirkpatrick’s early life
- 55-56 On Claypole (interesting, but ineffective as the promised sort of “example”)
- 59 On Paddy Moore’s name wrongly entered in the Battalion’s list
- 60 On the other C. S. Lewis in Keble College
- 84 On “the Minto”
- 129 On Tolkien’s old school friends, each mentioned with their years of birth and death.
- 141-156 On the date of Lewis’s conversion: a very useful but strangely cumbersome presentation. In this form, it seems to belong either in an appendix or in a volume of “scholarly questions” as mentioned in the preface.
- 198-200 On *The Hobbit*’s publication history; McGrath seems to be aware he may be going too far here (“If this book were mainly about Tolkien...”).
- 266 Superfluous full name “William Thompson Kirkpatrick” (already given on pp. 6 and 30, complete with years of birth and death).
- 272 On the reading order of the Narnia series. While sensible and useful in its conclusion, a discussion at this length belongs in an appendix at best.
- 296 On the “most interesting” question why there are *seven* Narnian stories.
 — The answer is interesting, but the question in itself is not, and much too long drawn out. All sense of balance with other episodes of the biography is lost.

5. JARGON AND POOR STYLE

- 102 “Yet despite his differences with Barfield, Lewis credits him with bringing about two fundamental changes in his own thinking.”
 — This book has a total of 257 sentences beginning with *Yet*, four of them on the first two pages of the Preface; there is a further total of 61 instances of *yet* in other places. The present case, reinforced by *despite*, illustrates its often improper or con-

fusing use. Lewis made it abundantly clear that his differences with Barfield were the whole point of their friendship and precisely the reason why their exchanges were so fruitful.

201 “*Although this is a subsidiary point, it is often incorrectly presented as if it were the total sum of Lewis’s approach.*”

— Either “Although” or “incorrectly” is redundant.

225 “*For Lewis, the kind of ‘sense-making’ offered by the Christian vision of reality is about discerning a resonance between the theory and the way the world seems to be.*”

229 “*Ballard Lectures on the themes of Milton’s Paradise Lost*”

231 “*These prestigious lectures ... would become the basis of his classic volume ...*”

233 “*engaging cultural anxieties about the Christian faith*”

276 “*a deceptively subtle critique of certain Darwinian ways of understanding...*”

298 “*Amid the wreckage of these implausible suggestions, an alternative has recently emerged – that Lewis was shaped by what the great English seventeenth-century poet John Donne called ‘the Heptarchy, the seven kingdoms ...’*” etc.

— But his *wreckage* of course is itself a heap of *alternatives*; and the object of shaping was not Lewis but his idea for the seven Chronicles of Narnia.

353 “*In the end, Hooper’s visit was postponed, although their correspondence continued.*”

— A stark case of the phrase *In the end* used as a stopgap devoid of meaning.

Another is on p. 92, “In the end, Lewis threw all his hopes” etc. The book has total of 41 sentences beginning with the phrase.

379 “*truth and significance*”

— It is certainly defensible, and perhaps a very good idea, to end the book on a note of praise for Lewis’s sheer writing talent. Precisely in this context, however, the natural choice would seem to be for the phrase *truth and meaning* unmarred by the intrusion of *significance*: with “truth and meaning” we would have a good final sentence. If anything had to follow, the somewhat alien and incongruous John F. Kennedy quote about *art* and *truth* (disregarding both *meaning* and *significance*) might have been exchanged for a relevant quote from Lewis: a good candidate would be the end of his essay “Bluspels and Flalansferes” where he explains in what sense “poets will take the highest place” among writers, “and among the poets those who have at once the tenderest care for old words and the surest instinct for the creation of new metaphors” (*Selected Literary Essays*, p. 265): “For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”

passim Stopgaps: yet / in the end, eventually, finally / clearly / classic / theme(s)

passim Jargon: explore / engage / appreciate / allow / is/are about ... / significant / issues / concerns / approaches

6. SOME WORD AND PHRASE COUNTS

e-text search excluding acknowledgements, bibliography, notes and index

<i>alphabetical order</i>		<i>order of frequency</i>	
angel(s)	0	Yet **	257
appreciat~	52	Tolkien	211
approach~	73	significan~	122
Barfield [Owen]	26	clearly	113
classic	36	concern~	97
clearly	113	cultur~	95
concern~	97	explor~	86
cultur~	95	theme(s)	76
D/d/evil(s)	7	approach~	73
eldil(s)	0	finally	54
engag/es/ed/ing	45	appreciat~	52
eventually	26	So **	49
explor~	86	in the end	47
finally	54	engag/es/ed/ing	45
idealism/t	0	vision	43
identity	37	identity	37
in the end	47	issue(s)	37
I/i/ncarnation~	4	classic	36
issue(s)	37	Barfield [Owen]	26
Macdonald	7	eventually	26
miracle(s)*	3	naturalis~	16
naturalis~	16	D/d/evil(s)	7
obey, obedien~	3	Macdonald	7
significan~	122	I/i/ncarnation~	4
So **	49	miracle(s) *	3
supernatur~	0	obey, obedien~	3
theme(s)	76	angel(s)	0
Tolkien	211	eldil(s)	0
vision	43	idealism~	0
Yet **	257	supernatur~	0

* excluding mentions of the book title, *Miracles*

** as first word of a sentence

7. THE PROMISE OF THE PREFACE

Par. 1 Narnia and the Tolkien connection declared to be reasons which “alone” would make “the story of C. S. Lewis worth telling”.

— The map of Narnia adorning the book’s endpapers suggests that this biography will indeed focus on Narnia.

Par. 2-3 “But there is far more to C. S. Lewis than this.” – Barfield’s “three Lewises”: imaginative, apologetic, academic. The “second” Lewis further defined as “concerned to communicate and share his rich vision of the intellectual and imaginative power of the Christian faith”.

Par. 6 If the book’s title (“A Life”) and size (431 pages) suggested the promise of a continuous and balanced biography, this promise appears to be withdrawn (“not concerned with documenting every aspect of Lewis’s life”). Paragraph’s opening question “how the three Lewises are related to each other” silently transfigured into the vaguer and perhaps different issue of “connections between Lewis’s external and internal worlds” as the book’s overall theme. Both sorts of “world” further described in various, ambiguous, and incongruous terms. Narnia characterised as an “imaginary world” (rather than *imaginative*), “inhabited” by Lewis as he inhabited the “real worlds” of Oxford and Cambridge. One clear promise among this elusive variety of aims: the book will be “focussing on [Lewis’s] writings”.

Par. 7 Lewis’s posthumous fame distinguished from his rise to fame during his life, and announced as the subject of the last chapter.

— A useful distinction and a good idea.

Par. 8 Great expectations. “This biography tries to weave these strands together”. – In spite of previous restrictions, the book is repeatedly referred to as “this biography”. What seems in effect to be promised is a grand synthesis of *all* of Lewis’s writings and *all* Lewis scholarship of the past two decades. Being “firmly grounded” in all those earlier studies, the book will actually be “able to go beyond” them.

Par. 9-11 The book’s subtitle explained.

* Lewis’s *reluctance* said to be caused by his lay status as a popular theologian.

— The prominent place accorded to this word as an element of the book’s subtitle remains implausible.

* His *eccentricity* defined in terms of social mores, academic trends, and ecclesiastical structures.

Par. 12 The book’s main objective now declared to be, simply, “to *understand* [Lewis] – above all, his ideas, and how these found expression in his writings.”

Par. 13 The problem of a surfeit of facts. “This biography adds to what is known about Lewis’s life, while also trying to make sense of it. How are these facts to be woven together, so that they may disclose a pattern? This biography ... is not another rehearsal of the vast army of facts and figures concerning his life, but an attempt to

identify its deeper themes and concerns, and assess its significance. This is not a work of synopsis, but of analysis.”

— The suggestion that there have already been several such “rehearsals” on the market is false; Green & Hooper 2002 would be the only candidate but isn’t mentioned. Hooper’s 1996 *Companion & Guide* is not a biography, although it contains a brief one. A really comprehensive biography might be precisely the thing needed now, if ever; but this possibility is dismissed or ignored. While duly characterising his work as a matter of “trying” and “an attempt”, McGrath never addresses the question whether *he* is actually in complete command of all the facts and figures. The presumption seems to be that he is. Meanwhile, if the facts in this book are to be “woven together” as well as unravelled (“analysed”), and if information about Lewis’s life is going to be “added” as well as skipped, then the reader is really in for anything.

Par. 14 *Collected Letters* cited more than any other source.

— Excellent. However, the present biography need not on this score be an essential improvement on Green & Hooper in its revised edition of 2002. Even if some letters were still undiscovered by that time, Hooper’s command of all the sources including the letters surely was already unparalleled, not to speak of further primary sources. The chief novelty introduced by the *Collected Letters* for biographical purposes may well be that references can now be made to a published source. McGrath does indeed draw useful quotes and information from this source, but has not used it in the sense of summarizing what these volumes tell us about Lewis as a letter writer. To go by the index of this biography, figures like Bede Griffiths, Vera Mathews, Dorothy Sayers, Sheldon Vanauken and Mary Van Deusen have not gained any prominence here from their prominence in the *Letters*.

Par. 15 Strong claims of painstaking scholarship: “... a critical biography, which examines the evidence for existing assumptions and approaches, and corrects them where necessary ... this wearying yet necessary process of checking everything against documentary evidence ... ”

Par. 18 Lewis referred to not as “Jack” but as “Lewis”.

— Sensible enough. The motivation is remarkable: “... this is the Lewis whom he himself would wish future generations to know”. One wonders whether, or to what extent, this consideration has also shaped some of the weightier biographical decisions.

Par. 19 Repeated assertion that Lewis’s *writings* are “what really matters”: “Throughout this work, wherever possible, I have tried to engage with his writings ...”

— The reservation, *wherever possible*, is not explained.

Par. 20-21 McGrath’s “selling points” as Lewis’s biographer: Irish roots, Oxford career, apologetic career.

— Plausible and welcome.

Par. 22 Further strong claims. McGrath states that, after his reading Lewis’s complete works, there followed “a reading – in some cases a somewhat critical rereading – of the sub-

stantial secondary literature concerning Lewis, his circle of friends, and the intellectual and cultural context in which they lived, thought, and wrote. Finally, I examined unpublished archive material ...”

— No reservations are made.

Par. 23 A alarming final remark: “some of the scholarly questions that emerged from this detailed research” have been “avoided” in this biography and transferred to a “a more academic study”. That study is *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, published by a different publisher. The need for this, says McGrath, “became clear at an early stage”. — None of this clarity is shared with the reader. No examples are given of the resulting sort of omissions, or of those scholarly questions which have *not* been avoided; the only indication of actual consequences of this measure for readers of this biography is that “notes and bibliography” have been “kept to the bare minimum”. One still wonders why a chronological list of Lewis’s works should not be provided in any biography of this size, “academic” or otherwise, especially one that “tries to engage with his writings”; the list on pp. 391-392 is indeed useless except as a quick way to discharge the duty of providing references to published material. On the other hand, there is a nine-page small-print list of “secondary studies” and a total of 774 end notes. Nor do we learn why Lewis’s “intellectual world” should be the special reserve of “scholarly questions”, or how this “intellectual world” could be downplayed in a book whose stated aim is “to *understand* Lewis – above all, his ideas”. The reader is apparently supposed to ask no questions and to be happy that not too many difficult matters will spoil the book.

No less troubling is McGrath’s explanation that his “concern in this volume is to tell a story, not to settle occasionally arcane and invariably detailed academic debates”. While the “army of facts and figures” was dismissed in the name of “analysis” a few pages earlier, analysis now seems to be dismissed in the name of story-telling. The reader is indeed in for anything.

8. COMMENDABLE FEATURES

passim People adequately or well described: Albert & Flora Lewis, Warnie, Mrs Moore, Arthur Greeves, Ruth Pitter, Don Giovanni Calabria

passim Issues well described:

* chronological snobbery (168, 183-184 with the reference to Owen Barfield, 187)

* application for the Cambridge chair

* Irish backgrounds (especially the remark on p. 9, “Lewis never made his Irish roots into a fetish” etc.)

* historical and institutional contexts generally

passim Excellent photographs, well placed. Lewis portrait on back of jacket especially well-chosen, little known, and impressive.

- 88 Note 21, on Lewis's 1921 prize essay on "Optimism": Good to know that a serious search has been done so that it can be definitively given up as lost.
- 108 *"The qualities we associate with good poetry ... are found in Lewis's prose."*
- 120 Reference to Lewis's remark in a letter of 1929 on "the deathbed of someone you really loved".
- 141f Lewis's conversion date revised.
- 169 *"For Lewis, the key issue ..."* – A good general characteristic of *The Pilgrim's Regress*.
- 204 Clever use of a 1954 letter to Shelburne to obtain such scant information as is available on Lewis's confessions to Father Adams.
- 255 Setting the record straight on the Anscombe affair. *"Lewis's embarrassment concerned the somewhat public nature of this refinement, not the intellectual process itself."* – This seems exactly true in light of George Sayer's testimony (*Jack*, chapter 16, penultimate paragraph). That source should have been quoted.
- 272f A plea for the correct reading order of the Narnia books.
- 274 The subtitles of both *LWW* en *LB* ("A Story for Children"): a keen observation. The interpretation as "brackets" is not wholly convincing, but here is a useful warning to publishers not to fiddle with such things.
- 310v The account of Lewis's election to the Cambridge chair shows a remarkable combination of good research and flowing presentation.
- 333 A telling and amusing detail: the 1940 blackout curtains still in place in 1952. All the better because it comes from an unpublished source.
- 346-347 On *A Grief Observed*. *"It is difficult, and possibly quite improper, to seize on a single moment,"* etc.; and *"... a narrative of the testing and maturing of faith, not simply its recovery – and certainly not its loss."*
- 352 Tolkien and the Nobel Prize. Recently discovered interesting fact.