

YOUNG JACK

*Andrew Walker traces the development of the young
CS Lewis into the man who argued for mere Christianity
and imagined the magical world of Narnia*

Many people are not aware that the man who wrote over 40 religious books is also the author of several major works in literary history and criticism. From *The Allegory of Love*, published in 1936, to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, published in 1954, and on to his last major work, published in 1964, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, CS Lewis spanned 40 years of English scholarship. He spent 30 of those years at Magdalene College, Oxford, and then 10 years at Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he was also Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature.

I mention this not only to give Lewis due honour now we are well past the centenary of his birth, but also to remind us that his religious imagination was baptized in oceans of great literature. His university achievements also remind us that this Oxford don was exceptionally talented and very, very bright – a fact that the film *Shadowlands* totally fails to reflect. His examiner at Oxford when Lewis went up in 1918 remarked that he was better read than any undergraduate he ever met.

Snapshots of a life

All of this might lead us to conclude that while CS Lewis was undoubtedly brilliant, his personal life was really rather boring. Not for him a life of adventure like Robert Louis Stephenson, trekking into the wilderness of California or braving the Pacific storms on course for exotic islands in the South Seas. No, except for a brief spell in the trenches in 1918, and a rather late romantic marriage to feisty New Yorker Joy Davidman in 1956, Lewis remained virtually ensconced, like a latter day Rapunzel, in the ivory tower of university scholarship.

He escaped the college quads only for the occasional walk and the more than occasional trip to the pub, where he liked nothing better than the company and conversation of other intellectual men. Lewis liked women, too, but he preferred them to be striking and clever, rather than beautiful and decorous. He seems, for example, to have had a hankering for, as well as a horror of, the witch Jadis in his book, *The Magician's Nephew*. 'A dem fine woman,' Digory's Uncle Andrew called her in the concluding words of that book.

Lewis's outer life was fixed from early manhood. This rather large, plain, red-faced, yellow toothed, dishevelled and balding man, whom AN Wilson, Lewis's most acerbic biographer, described as looking rather like a 'pork butcher', rose early, read and wrote all morning (he never typed), supped too much beer at lunch, walked it off in the afternoon, often with dog, dined in college rooms, went to pub, his favourite being the Eagle and Child, where

he conversed late into the evening with friends – often with the so-called ‘Inklings’, which included fellow writers Charles Williams, JRR Tolkien, and occasionally Dorothy Sayers.

Lewis virtually chain-smoked throughout the day and night, both cigarettes and pipe, enjoyed bawdy humour with his beer, and was very loud and cheery – not at all retiring in manner or pious in outward behaviour. Christopher Tolkien once wrote to his famous father that Lewis had said he was giving up beer for Lent, after downing three pints in quick succession.

Sometimes, Lewis would briefly leave Oxford to give invited lectures – always travelling by train, for he hated cars and could not drive – and in 1942 he famously broadcast on BBC Radio a series of talks that were repackaged and published in 1952 as *Mere Christianity*. Despite the fact that he hardly ever read newspapers, he wrote for the *Daily Mirror* during the Second World War, and even sallied forth from the closeted world of Oxford to talk religion to the troops.

When he was in his home, the Kilns at Oxford, which was most of the time, he enjoyed a correspondence with literally hundreds of ordinary people – many of whom lived in the United States. Perhaps nothing was more remarkable of Lewis than that this most academic and closeted of men had the common touch and a touching faith, like his hero GK Chesterton, in the moral good sense of ordinary people.

As a tutor Lewis was outstanding, but also demanding; he never backed down from an argument and he liked to win. His hectoring and sometimes bullying style was too much for some; the English poet John Betjeman, for example, came to loathe him. He certainly could go over the top, as on the occasion when he chased an unfortunate undergraduate down the stairs from his rooms at Magdalene with a sword and shouted at him not to come back until he had learned to read a text correctly.

But for most students Lewis was an inspiring and tireless tutor. One of the most extraordinary accolades he ever received came from the infamous literary critic, Kenneth Tynan, who staged the nude musical *Oh! Calcutta!* in Britain. In later life, he called Lewis the greatest man he had ever met and admitted: ‘If I were ever to stray into the Christian camp, it would be because of Lewis’s arguments as expressed in books like *Miracles*.’ And he asked for these words of CS Lewis to be read out at his funeral: ‘These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire: but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited.’

We could go on in this tantalizing way, taking snapshots of Lewis’s life, but if we want some real insight into his work and life – his inner life which was never boring – then it is better if we turn to his childhood and early manhood, because it is there that the real Lewis, the champion of historic Christianity, the Christian apologist, the writer of children’s classic tales, emerges.

Jack’s childhood

Lewis was born on 29th November 1898 in Belfast. His father, Albert, of Welsh extraction, and his mother Flora, the daughter of an Irish clergyman, were both intellectually gifted and

financially comfortable. The first thing to understand about Clive Staples Lewis was that he was an Ulster Irishman with all that that entails. When he was little and being toilet trained, his nanny used to call his stools 'little popes'.

The second thing to understand is that he had an elder brother, Warnie, whom he adored and remained loyal to all his life. Warnie was a lifelong alcoholic, and when Lewis was buried in Headington Quarry church, Warnie could not attend because he was drunk. It was Warnie who was the first to call Clive 'Jack', the name Lewis was called all his life by his friends. At the age of eight, Jack could write in his diary, 'Hoorah! Warnie comes home this morning. I am lying in bed waiting for him and thinking about him, and before I know where I am I hear his boots pounding on the stairs, he comes into the room, we shake hands and begin to talk.'

And how they talked and played. In 1905 they moved to Little Lea, a large, rambling house in Belfast with attic rooms, creaking corridors and acres of space. There, young Jack and Warnie played and wrote stories together. Little Big of Boxen (a land of talking animals) was just one of the characters to emerge from Jack's pen and paintbrush. Little Lea was a haven for two rather lonely little boys whose parents preferred that they be neither seen nor heard.

The third thing to understand about Jack Lewis was that he loved his mother Flora more than anybody in the world. She was his rock, his security, his joy. In 1908, when he was just 10 years old, Jack's mother died after a long fight against cancer. The young boy's life was shattered. He had to attend her wake where she lay in an open coffin, the marks of corruption probably visible. Jack never really got over his mother's passing nor the decay of death.

It is not surprising that years later, in *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory's mother is lovingly described on her deathbed, as if she were Flora: 'There she lay, as he had seen her like so many other times, propped up on the pillows, with a thin, pale face that would make you cry to look at.' And can we blame the middle-aged Lewis for curing Digory's mother of the terminal illness with the magic apple from Narnia? Never was a childhood wish fulfilment more touching, more understandable, more lovingly displayed; it was an imaginative balm to heal the broken heart.

A few short years after writing the first Narnia tale, Jack Lewis was to see his dear wife Joy seemingly healed of bone cancer by prayer, only for the two year remission to be cruelly ended by Joy's premature death. Lewis's despair, anger and the inklings of hope are starkly revealed in his scorchingly honest book, *A Grief Observed*. In my opinion, this short tract on grief, pain and faith offers greater Christian vision and conviction than the rather clever but cold defence of God's dealings with the world of suffering in *The Problem of Pain*, written by Lewis in 1940.

Adolescence, myths and legends

On the day that Flora died in 1908, the Shakespearean quotation on her calendar was from King Lear: 'Men must endure their going hence'. It seems that small boys must also endure such loss, because just two weeks later, young Jack, his grief still raw, was sent to boarding school in England. Not only was this cruel in itself, but Lewis found the school itself cruel. The matron was obsessed with spiritualism, and the headmaster was so unstable that some time after Lewis left he was found to be clinically insane.

Five years later, at the age of 15, he entered one of England's most famous private schools, Malvern College. Lewis hated it. Far too clever for boys and teachers alike, and poor at games, he was mercilessly bullied. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis barely mentions that he was wounded in the Great War, but spends pages raging against the English boarding school system and his misery at Malvern. He later explained this by saying that he had expected war to be brutal, while he had believed that school would be a haven of security and the nursery of civilisation.

Jack lost his childhood faith in God after the death of his mother and under the iron regime of school life. Throughout his adolescence he was without faith and convinced intellectually that reason alone was the answer to understanding reality. But his heart told him something else. Lewis was deeply romantic by temperament and remained so all his life. He loved the ancient romances of Arthur, the Norse Legends, the epic beauty of *Beowulf*, the allure and charm of fairy stories. He was more at home in the world of ancient literature than he was in the modern world – something that held true for his whole life. Years later he wrote of the joy of reading old books, and his mature conviction was that part of the cure for the maladies and follies of the present age was to step back imaginatively into older times where we can gain perspective on the 'chronological snobbism' of our own.

Nowhere was Lewis' romanticism more apparent than in his love of pagan myths. He records in his autobiography that he knew they were lies, but believed them to be 'lies breathed through silver'. He recalls a strange experience that happened to him on hearing the line from *Beowulf*, 'Balder the beautiful is dead'. It created in him an emotional frisson, a thrill, a longing for the object of that emotion. He called this longing by the German word *Sehnsucht*, which suggests unrequited love, unbearable longing, mystic yearning.

Lewis came to believe that such longing was a desire inspired by true reality and not merely a psychological or subjective experience. Such a belief is both an echo of the old philosophical argument for God based on desire and a deeply romantic conviction that truth can be intuited through what the 19th century Romantics called 'the affections'.

He later divided the acquiring of all knowledge into two modes of perception. Intuition or imagination he called by the French term *connaitre*. He believed that imagination was the organ of meaning, and that a 'baptized imagination' was essential for successful Christian mission and nurture. Straight rational knowledge, the faculty of reason, he was to call *savoir*. For him, reason was the natural organ of truth. In his early days, although he was ideologically committed to the superiority of *savoir*, his heart was given to *connaitre*.

Lewis, then, was a romantic by disposition before he came a romantic by conviction. His commitment to romance and reason – to *connaitre* and *savoir* – can be seen by the subtitle to his first Christian book after his conversion. The book, published in 1933, was entitled *The Pilgrim's Regress*, and the subtitle is, *An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. *The Pilgrim's Regress* is not one of Lewis' great books, but it points to much of his future work.

John, our pilgrim, is born in Puritania and dreams, or intuits, a beautiful island. He goes in search of this paradise along what Lewis calls the main road. This reminds us of Lewis's great viaduct of 'mere Christianity' which towers over the uncertain terrain of marsh and tracks. In the Regress, the main road is bordered by the north lands of cold but strident reason leading

to arrogance and atheism. To the south, the siren lands of emotional un-reason beckon him.

The message is clear: reason and romance when both taken to excess can kill. Stay on the main road, adopt the golden mean, stick to the viaduct of 'mere Christianity', don't let the letter of the law kill, or romantic longing overcome you. If you are an Anglican, like Lewis, you might of course see the main road in terms of the Anglican *via media*.

It's also worthy of note that in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis, who spent most of his adult life believing the doctrine of progress to be a poison stemming from the philosophical Enlightenment, asks us to see pilgrimage in terms not of civilisation marching onwards but a personal return to the garden, a regress to the world of childhood wonder, an inward turn where we find in the stillness of our heart the place to go 'further up and further in'. When pilgrim John eventually finds his paradise, it turns out to be adjacent to home. Home, after all, is where the heart is.

Between the time Lewis left Malvern School and took up his studies at Oxford university, he spent three years with a private tutor, WT Kirkpatrick, at Great Bookham in Surrey. A former teacher of his father, the private tutees called him 'the Great Knock'. Under his tutelage – for the Great Knock was as much a tartar as a tutor – Lewis became precociously proficient at ancient languages. Before his youth was out, he had become fluent not only in Latin and classical Greek, but also New Testament and Attic Greek.

The time with the Knock was an important period of Lewis's life, for the old man was a stickler for logic and a master of Socratic dialogue. AN Wilson tells the amusing story that when Jack arrived in Great Bookham, he remarked that Surrey was much wilder than expected. 'Stop!' shouted the Knock. 'What do you mean by wildness and what grounds had you for not expecting it?'

He then continued to show Lewis that what he had said was unreflective, if not meaningless. Lewis was later to say that the Knock would have been a Logical Positivist if born at a later date. As it was, he was also a humanist and an unbeliever.

Coming home to mythology and faith

When Jack Lewis arrived at Oxford in 1919 shortly after the Great War, he was intellectually on the side of progressive thinking in philosophy and set against the truth claims of Christianity. Interestingly, Lewis rejected Christianity not only because of siding with progressive thinking, but also because his great love and knowledge of pagan myths convinced him that it was not original. Rather like the German theologian, Rudolph Bultmann, Lewis felt the story of the Christ King was unhistorical for it was so like the dying corn king of primitive fertility mythology, or echoed the death-resurrection motifs found in Osiris and Balder.

The problem was that Lewis found it harder to reject Christians. Men such as Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, and JRR Tolkien were all Christians, and he preferred their company, as well as their aesthetics, to the progressive set he aspired to belong to. To make matters worse for an Ulster Irishman, Tolkien was a Roman Catholic!

Between 1920 and 1925, when Lewis was elected to a fellowship in English language at Magdalene College, Oxford, both his interests and his beliefs tilted away from progressive

ideas and towards the sapientia (or eternal wisdom) of the ancients on the one hand, and to religious belief on the other hand. Lewis found, despite the Great Knock's predilection for positivism, that he had little sympathy for the new philosophy stemming from Moore, Whitehead, Russell and Wittgenstein. He found instead that he preferred the idealism of Victorian idealist TH Green, and the Cambridge Platonism of the 17th century philosopher Henry More.

Above all, he was convinced by the arguments of the 18th century bishop and philosopher George Berkeley that spiritual reality is primary and material life is the appearance or perception of the spiritual world. He seems to have been at least half convinced by his friend Owen Barfield that the most primitive animism which saw spirits, elves and sprites in every brook and tree was in some sense profoundly true.

This philosophical shift is no small matter in Lewis's development, for once he embraced idealism and strains of Platonism, he was never to abandon them, and as we shall shortly see, they helped him to embrace Christianity.

By 1929 Lewis had recaptured his childhood love of mythology to such an extent that he had come not merely to revel in them but also to believe that they embodied truth greater than the truths of fact. Lewis later came to believe, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge had done before him, that the ancient myths were a gleam of divine light illuminating the human imagination. Myths were refractions of spiritual or divine reality.

Jack was not yet a Christian, but he had become a theist – he believed that a personal God of some kind existed. In his rooms at Oxford, he got down on his knees as a dejected convert, and assented that God was God. In 1929 also, Albert Lewis died at the age of 66. Lewis was full of remorse and felt guilty at the way he had often ridiculed his father. He was not yet to know it, but he was close to conversion.

This happened in 1931 and there were two parts to it. The first part was intellectual conviction, and it was Tolkien, egged on by Hugo Dyson, who helped bring it about. Tolkien convinced Lewis that what was original and unique about Jesus Christ is that he was myth become fact. To use a notion of Lewis's later writings which he gleaned from Bishop Berkeley, higher and spiritual things could be transposed into lower, material ones. In the incarnation, myth was grounded and yet still remained myth despite its particular historical embodiment. Divinity and materiality coinhered, and Jesus Christ of Nazareth was not only revealed as Immanuel – God with us – but as one of us: the God-man (although this is expressing it in a more theological way than Lewis typically did).

The second phase of Lewis's conversion might be called the existentialist part. On 28th September 1931, Jack went on a trip with friends to Whipsnade Zoo. When the journey began, he was still not a convinced Christian, but by the time he arrived he was. In the language of Francis Thompson, the 'hound of heaven' had at last caught his prey.

Championing the faith

By 1931, when Jack Lewis was 33, his intellectual habits and religious predilections were mostly formed. He never abandoned his love of mythology, his belief in an almost magical

and certainly supernatural world. His commitment to reason and romanticism was unswerving. Existentially, however, Lewis had changed from the old man and had begun the long regress to the new one. Once he had turned to Christ he never let go, even though his faith was sorely tested when Joy died. He once said that you should stick to a great idea when it has commanded your attention and if he ever had considerable intellectual doubts about Christianity he never wrote of them – although in *A Grief Observed* he does question the goodness of God.

On the level of wish-fulfilment, I think Lewis would have followed Christ even if he had doubted whether the myth of the dying king had indeed been grounded as historical fact. In his Narnia book, *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum defies the witch by saying: ‘That’s why I’m going to stand by the play-world. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it. I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia.’

But of course I am just speculating here. What I think is of religious significance is that once Lewis turned to Christ, He commandeered his attention day and night. Lewis knew he was intellectually arrogant and intimidating, and so when he embraced the Christian faith he also embraced its disciplines. He attended Anglican liturgy weekly and faithfully took the blessed sacrament. Despite his Ulster Protestantism, his Anglicanism was more High Church than low. He attended confession weekly when he could, and took spiritual direction for his life from the local priest.

Not only did he give virtually all his free time to writing and defending the Christian faith, but he also gave his money to charities and people in need. If AN Wilson is correct in his unproven assertion that he had sexual relations when he was a young undergraduate with Mrs Moore, the mother of his wartime friend Paddy who had died in the trenches, he more than atoned as he looked after her well into her old age, doing the most menial chores cheerfully and without stint.

Looking back now, we can see what a champion of the faith Lewis was – and remains today through his writings. When the theologians and Christian philosophers fell like a pack of cards before the advance of liberalism in between the two World Wars, it was Lewis who armed himself for the fight. While not a professional philosopher, he wrote of *The Problem of Pain*, upheld the classical moral virtues in *The Abolition of Man*, defended *Miracles* and advanced the cause of historic Christianity with skill and bombastic aplomb. Speaking of the generation just before and after the Second World War, professor Basil Mitchell, a professional philosopher formerly of Oriel College, Oxford, said of Lewis that ‘he both intellectually and imaginatively made Christianity seem credible again.’

But it was not only the intellectuals who took heart. In 1942, the ‘apostle to the sceptics’, as Lewis had become known, wrote a work of devastating wit and spiritual power, called *The Screwtape Letters*, ostensibly written by a senior devil (Screwtape) to his nephew Wormwood. So brilliant and imaginative was this book, and yet so accessible to the general public, that Lewis became a household name, and his (rather flattering) likeness appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Jack wrote three science fiction novels, the second of which, *Perelandra*, is one of his great works; but he went on to pen the seven Narnia chronicles which have now become nothing

less than children's classics. The chronicles are more episodic than epic, more impressionistic than pre-Raphaelite in detail. They are not careful 'sub creations' in the Tolkien mould, and in fact Tolkien did not like them.

The children are white, middle-class English boys and girls with somewhat stilted and 'golly gosh' speech. Except for the spunky Lucy, the girls are not very interesting. What is interesting is that Lewis turned his hand to children's fairy tales after being defeated in a debate on naturalism at the Socratic Club at Oxford in 1948 by the formidable Elizabeth Anscombe. After this episode, Lewis never wrote Christian apologetics again.

Instead, he regressed to his childhood, fell back on his imagination and let his word pictures and baptized images tumble onto the page in almost reckless abandon. Everything from neo-Platonism, Patristic theology, Norse legend – even Father Christmas – was thrown into the mix. On the one hand, the Narnia stories are careless, incomplete works (the chronology does not fit, for example). On the other hand, they are immediate, magical and emotionally intense. They are 'ripping yarns', because Lewis himself lets rip. Although they appear to be written for children, I think they were really written by Lewis for himself, and possibly for his brother Warnie.

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is without doubt the more accomplished work, but Narnia grabs the attention with its power and numinous quality. Lewis, of course, wrote the Narnia stories not as Christian allegories but as myth. He would have been content, I am sure, if through them children learned of good and evil, the cardinal virtues, and perhaps even experienced *Sehnsucht* for themselves.

Dr Andrew Walker is Professor of Theology and Education at Kings College, London, and former Director of the CS Lewis Centre