

C.S. Lewis and the Westcott House Governing Board

Those who have read Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*, or his more popular version of the same, *The Narnia Code: C.S. Lewis and the Secret of the Seven Heavens*, know that C.S. Lewis was not always public in some of the areas of his life. He never told anyone that the medieval cosmology of the seven planets became the organizing principle for the seven Chronicles of Narnia. His home life was similarly private. In the early years, few of his friends knew about Mrs. Moore and her daughter Maureen, and much of that story was even hidden from his father, Albert Lewis. Later in life, his benevolence through the Agape Fund, which collected the royalties from his books and was used for many worthy causes, is somewhat well known, but the precise nature and extent of his generosity is still a mystery.

For these reasons, it should not surprise us to learn that for four-and-a-half years, from June 1, 1955 through December 1, 1959, C.S. Lewis served on the Council of Westcott House, Cambridge, the governing board of that institution, a theological college of the Church of England. How this came to my attention and what I learned about his service on the Council comprise the rest of this article.

On March 4, 1955, the Council received the resignation of Mr. Bezzant, presumably James Stanley Bezzant (1897-1967), Dean of St. John's College, Cambridge, the theologian who later teamed with Alec Vidler and others to publish *Objections to Christian Belief*.¹ During that same meeting, "It was unanimously decided that Dr. Ladborough and Mr. Walls be asked to serve a second term on the Council and that an invitation be sent to Dr. C.S. Lewis to join the Council."²

Lewis accepted the invitation. While he was unable to attend the first meeting after his appointment, held on Nov. 25, 1955, he made it to the next meeting on Feb. 28, 1956 and most of the meetings for the next four-and-a-half years. He served two terms of two years each, and, at the end of those four years, he agreed to stay on for another six months while the Royal Charter was being completed.

He attended Council meetings on the following dates (all meetings were held at 2:30 p.m.):

Tuesday, February 28, 1956



Westcott House on Jesus Lane

¹ Published in 1963, the book contains four open lectures given in February 1963 in Cambridge, intended not to answer objections to Christian belief, but to "plumb the depths of the objections, without complacently assuming that answers are readily available" (p. 7). In the written publication, following an introduction by A.R. Vidler, D.M. MacKinnon presented his essay on "Moral Objections," H.A. Williams addressed "Psychological Objections," A.R. Vidler covered "Historical Objections," and J.S. Bezzant handled "Intellectual Objections."

² Clergy Training School Minutes of Council, 1887-1962, 425.

Thursday, May 17, 1956
Friday, Nov. 23, 1956
Friday, March 8, 1957
Friday, May 17, 1957
Thursday, February 6, 1958
Thursday, February 19, 1959
Wednesday, April 22, 1959
Tuesday November 17, 1959

He was unable to attend on the following dates:

Friday, November 25, 1955
Monday, April 30, 1956 (Emergency Meeting)
Thursday, November 14, 1957
Friday, May 23, 1958
Monday, Nov. 17, 1958
Tuesday May 12, 1959
Tuesday July 28, 1959
Monday October 12, 1959³

While we don't know the reasons for most of his absences, we know that Lewis was conscientious in his responsibilities and we know the reasons for two of his absences. Several of his absences may have been due to the fact that he was deep into the examination period, correcting student exams many hours a day and, therefore, unable to attend. Such was the case on May 23, 1958. On May 12, 1959, he left for Manchester, England, where he received an honorary doctorate and enjoyed the hospitality of Professor and Mrs. Eugène Vinaver, and thereby missed that meeting as well. Likewise, his absence from an emergency meeting, probably called on short notice, can be understood and accepted.

The People with Whom He Served

Jack's service on the Council brought him into contact with several well-known people over those years, some of whom he already knew. Dr. Richard W. Ladborough (1908-1972), a Cambridge University lecturer in French at Magdalene College and Jack's closest friend in Cambridge, was a member of the Council when Lewis was appointed and is very likely the person who recommended him. Since 1954, he had served Magdalene as Dean and Pepys Librarian.⁴ His remembrances of Lewis appear in *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*.⁵

The Revd. Dr. Alec R. Vidler (1899-1991) was appointed toward the end of Lewis' tenure on the Council and continued to serve after Lewis left. He was Dean of King's College at

³ All dates are drawn from the Minutes of the Council, located in the Clergy Training School Minutes of Council, 1887-1962.

⁴ Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Volume 3, 1687.

⁵ Richard W. Ladborough, "In Cambridge," in James T. Como, ed., *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, New York: Macmillan, 1979, 1992, 98-104.

the time he joined the Council⁶ and editor of *Theology*, a periodical to which Jack had contributed, and a person Lewis had known for two decades. Lewis had first written to Vidler on Jan. 17, 1939,⁷ offering some names of potential subscribers for the new editor. In 1940 Lewis wrote a letter to the editor of *Theology*, later titled “Christianity and Culture,” and many years later Lewis wrote rather favorably of Vidler in *Letters to Malcolm*, a work published posthumously in 1964.⁸ However, he also stated of Vidler in that same work, “He wants—I think he wants very earnestly—to retain some Christian doctrines. But he is prepared to scrap a good deal. ‘Traditional doctrines’ are to be tested.”⁹

The Revd. Kenneth Carey (1908-1979), later Bishop of Edinburgh, was the Principal during the time that Lewis was on the Council, and the future Archbishop of Canterbury R.A.K. Runcie (1921-2000) was Vice-Principal when Lewis joined the Council. Runcie left Westcott House in 1956 for Trinity Hall, where he served as Fellow and Dean. He became Archbishop in 1980 and served in that capacity until 1991.

The Revd. H.W. Montefiore (1920-2005), a graduate of Westcott House who had ministered in Newcastle and Ely before becoming Fellow and Dean at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1953, became the Vicar of Great St. Mary ten years later and once invited Lewis to preach there. He was one of several Cambridge theologians who contributed a chapter to a book edited by Alec Vidler, *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding*.¹⁰

The Revd. Prof. C.F.D. Moule (1908-2007) was a leading New Testament scholar and Anglican priest who was appointed to the Council of Westcott House while serving as a Fellow of Clare College and Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity.

Early church historian, the Revd. H. Chadwick (1920-2008), was Fellow and Dean of Queens’ College, Cambridge. In 1959 he left Cambridge and took up the post of Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford and was associated with Christ Church Cathedral.

The Revd. J.S. Habgood became Vice-Principal when Runcie left for Trinity Hall. He is living in retirement in Malton, England. The Regius Professor of Divinity John Burnaby, also Dean of Trinity College, was the Chairman of the Council during the years that Lewis served on the Council.

The Issues the Council Addressed

One might hope for some watershed issues to be addressed during Lewis’ tenure on the Council, but most of the matters discussed were the day-to-day operation of the theological college. Seldom does the name of Lewis appear in the minutes of the Council, apart from the list of those who were present and those who sent apologies because they could not attend. This underscores the humble service of a man, who did not trumpet his service on the Council to others. One even wonders if his brother Warren ever knew about it, since Warren never mentions

⁶ Trevor Beeson, *Priests and Prelates: The Daily Telegraph Clerical Obituaries*, London: Continuum Books, 2002, 8f. Vidler became Dean in 1956 and remained in that position until 1966.

⁷ Letter to Vidler, *Collected Letters*, II, 255.

⁸ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 30.

⁹ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 32.

¹⁰ Hastings, Adrian. *A History of English Christianity: 1920–2000*. Fourth edition. London: SCM Press, 2001, 538.

it in his diary.¹¹ It also means, however, that the Council guided Westcott House well during his years of service since no controversy arose.

Perhaps most instructive for readers of Lewis is the manner in which Lewis' service on the Council put him in touch with the Principal, the Revd. Kenneth Carey, so that he could comment on a book of sermons by Alec Vidler. That comment led to an invitation from Carey for Lewis to speak to the staff and students of Westcott House in an essay that was then titled "Fern-seed and Elephants," and later retitled "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism."

The search for the precise location of that talk that led to the discovery, or rediscovery, of Lewis' service on the Council. When I spoke to Bishop Simon Barrington-Ward some weeks later, he knew about Lewis' service at Westcott House, but other students of C.S. Lewis were unaware. In November of 2012, I came to the Reception Office of Westcott House and inquired if someone at Westcott House might know the location of that



The Author with Dr. Margie Tolstoy

Lewis lecture. Administrative Assistant Mrs. Tracey Walton heard my request and contacted Dr. Margie Tolstoy, former teaching staff at Westcott House and now retired, who had agreed to provide some supervision over the archives. In Dr. Tolstoy's search through the archives, she discovered that C.S. Lewis had served on the Council of Westcott House, and she relayed that information to me. I, of course, was very interested and resolved to read through the minutes of the Council for information about Lewis' service.

While on the Council, Lewis was involved in many different projects. Among the most important was the development of the Royal Charter of Westcott House, which was the issue that led the Council to ask Lewis to stay on, beyond his two terms, until the Charter was completed. Lewis heard reports from the Principal on enrollment (Westcott House usually had 40+ students enrolled), guest lectures, various Council and House appointments or elections, academic standards and testing, domestic living arrangements, food service, budgetary matters, library improvements, student fees, conference fees, stipends, fund-raising, furnishings, and renovation. The Charter to which Lewis was a signatory was completed and granted by the Queen in 1959, Lewis' last year of service.

Also prominent among the events of Westcott House were the biannual Bishop Westcott Memorial Lectures. During Lewis' tenure, these were given biannually in 1956 by the Archbishop of York, Michael Ramsey, later Archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1958 by world renowned New Testament scholar Dr. C.K. Barrett of Durham. While Lewis was still on the Council in 1959, Professor H. Chadwick was invited to give the Westcott Memorial Lecture in 1960. We don't know whether or not Lewis attended any of these lectures, but it is certainly likely.

In conclusion, while the service of C.S. Lewis on the Council of Westcott House does not add appreciably to his life story, it nevertheless augments his legacy as a humble man, willing to serve in places where his talents could be well used.

¹¹ *Brothers & Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis*. Edited by Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Lamb Mead. Ballantine Books, 1988.