

C. S. Lewis, A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet
By Alister McGrath
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Reviewed by Joel D. Heck, Concordia University Texas

Do we need another biography of C. S. Lewis? We certainly don't need one like the biographies that have already been written, especially since very few people that knew Lewis are still alive. But we certainly do need what Alister McGrath offers us, given his upbringing in Ireland, particularly in County Down, his scholarship, and his writing skill. He offers us new information about Northern Ireland, some of it placed in the historical context of Edwardian England, some of it in the counties of Northern Ireland, and some of it from his personal experience. He writes from a distance, now that the study of the life and works of Lewis has traveled a half-century since Lewis's death, giving us some perspective. He writes much like John, the disciple of Jesus, who, Eusebius tells us (*Ecclesiastical History*, Book 6.14), wrote to offer us a picture of Jesus' life different from that of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In fact, McGrath writes well enough to offer us what this writer predicts will become the standard biography of the life of C. S. Lewis in the years ahead.

McGrath's fluid writing style combines with his experience in Ireland, his love of the life and works of Lewis, his research in the city of Oxford, and his reading of the letters of Lewis to provide new insights into the man whose works we have grown to love. With the *Collected Letters* of Lewis now available (the third volume was published in 2006), McGrath incorporates insights from those letters, resulting in some quite remarkable insights and discoveries in almost every chapter. Perhaps someday the publication of the complete diaries of Warren Lewis will result in the first ever composite biography of the two brothers. Frequently throughout the book, McGrath provides additional historical information, some of it from the letters and some of it from Lewis's military record. For example, McGrath explains that Lewis was probably assigned to the Somerset Light Infantry because Paddy Moore had been assigned to that division. Lewis was initially assigned to the King's Own Scottish Borderers (66).

Thankfully, you won't find McGrath using all the familiar Lewis quotes, such as the "endless books" quotation from *Surprised by Joy*, which some fans of Lewis have become tired of reading and reading and reading. The same is true of many other quotations. Instead, he uses less familiar words from Lewis as well as paraphrases of those frequently quoted passages, providing us with a refreshing perspective. You will also find many photographs you haven't seen before, period photographs illuminating the story of C. S. Lewis, such as a 1905 picture postcard of the Pension le Petit Vallon, the family hotel at which Flora Lewis vacationed in 1907 with Warren and Jack (21), a 1924 photo of the street along which Kirkpatrick and Lewis would have walked when they first met (39), and the inside of the Examination Schools (168) where Lewis often lectured in Oxford.

One of the major features of the McGrath biography is the redating of some events associated with Lewis's conversion to theism and to Christianity. Working with the letters of Lewis, he has convinced me that Lewis's conversion to theism happened in 1930 rather than 1929 and that his conversion to Christianity may have happened in 1932 rather than 1931. Lewis himself said that he wasn't good at dates, which explains why this brilliant Oxford academic could nevertheless make a mistake by one year. After all, he was writing *Surprised by Joy* in the

early 1950s. The second date is less conclusive, and probably less likely than the earlier date. For the reasons for these proposals, you will have to read the book yourself.

I also read in McGrath's book about the RAF lectures that Lewis gave during World War II and how they paved the way for Lewis's success on the BBC. When speaking to the RAF, Lewis, though expressing initial discouragement, had to learn to speak at the level of his non-academic audience, which prepared him for a wider and still more uneducated audience over the BBC. That is an important point, which McGrath establishes quite well and which no one that I know of, including certainly myself, had ever seen before. But it shows what can happen when one reads through all of the correspondence of Lewis in chronological order. Those letters have provided McGrath, and us through him, with insights into the life and works of Lewis, giving us a more complete picture of Lewis.

A few (among many) additional and significant (for me) insights from this book: I actually laughed out loud when I read this sentence: "Irritated that *Time* had incomprehensibly overlooked his own vastly superior claims to be the nation's top Christian apologist, Pittenger declared that Lewis was a theologically lightweight heretic—a total liability for the kind of intelligent Christianity that he himself so conspicuously represented" (241). The election of Lewis as a fellow of the British Academy followed one year after the publication of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954). The Socratic Club grew out of the Oxford Pastorate, originally established in 1893, when Stella Aldwinckle bypassed Dorothy L. Sayers, who lived in London, and all college chaplains to select Lewis (251) as its president. Lewis did not retreat from apologetics into "reason-free fantasy" after his debate with Elizabeth Anscombe in 1948, nor was his argument against naturalism wrong; it was just "imperfectly stated" (256). John Lucas's correspondence with McGrath about the replay of Lewis's argument (this time it was Lucas vs. Anscombe) summarizes well both the expertise of Lucas and the soundness of Lewis's argument: "So the contest was determined by the actual cogency of the arguments adduced. That is to say, I won" (256).

In addition, McGrath gives us much more on the influence of Edith Nesbit (269f.) than other biographers of Lewis, more on the reflection of Lewis's position on vivisection in the talking animals in Narnia (275f.), more on the likely origin of the name Aslan (288), and a lot more on the person of Joy Davidman, of whom Douglas Gresham once stated that she had gone to England with the intention "to seduce C. S. Lewis" (323).

The book contains a few very minor errors. For example, on page 259, McGrath writes that Father Adams, Lewis's private confessor, died in May 1952. According to *Collected Letters*, III, page 182, it was March rather than May. *Collected Letters*, III, page 284, tells me that Joy Davidman left for America on January 1, 1953 rather than on January 3, as McGrath suggests (325). One other minor error on page 343 is the spelling Natwilcius for Natvilcius (see the footnote in the first chapter of *Perelandra*).

One of the best parts of the book is the last chapter, in which McGrath gives us a history of the influence of Lewis in the fifty years since his death. While much more could be said, and will be said in the coming months, we catch a glimpse of the reasons for Lewis's popularity and the unusual fact that his books are selling better now than during his lifetime.

In short, if you want to understand the life of Lewis better, and the impact of his writings over the last half-century, buy the book and see for yourself. I assure you that you won't be disappointed ... except when you have to stop reading because you have finished the book!