

PLATE XCII



Photograph by Walter Stoneman, 1935

CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS

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1898–1963

CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS was born on 29 November 1898 at Belfast. His father was a solicitor, who, in the words of his son, ‘belonged to the first generation of his family that reached professional station’, being the grandson of a Welsh farmer whose son had emigrated to Ireland and risen to be partner in a firm of ‘Boilermakers, Engineers, and Iron Ship Builders’. His mother, Flora Augusta Hamilton, was the daughter of a clergyman, ‘with many generations of clergymen, lawyers, sailors, and the like behind her; on her mother’s side, through the Warrens, the blood went back to a Norman knight whose bones lie at Battle Abbey’. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy: the Shape of my Early Life*, published in 1955, Lewis analysed the contrary strains in his inheritance:

The two families from which I spring were as different in temperament as in origin. My father’s people were true Welshmen, sentimental, passionate, and rhetorical, easily moved both to anger and to tenderness; men who laughed and cried a great deal and who had not much talent for happiness. The Hamiltons were a cooler race. Their minds were critical and ironic and they had the talent for happiness in a high degree—went straight for it as experienced travellers go for the best seat in the train. From my earliest years I was aware of the vivid contrast between my mother’s cheerful and tranquil affection and the ups and downs of my father’s emotional life, and this bred in me long before I was old enough to give it a name a certain distrust or dislike of emotions as something uncomfortable and embarrassing and even dangerous.

The whole passage, and especially the last sentence, is highly revealing. Throughout Lewis’s work there runs a constant emphasis on ‘mental health’ and ‘sanity’: ‘To read Spenser is to grow in mental health.’ His favourite writers are praised for that ‘ease and good temper, that fine masculine cheerfulness’ which he honoured in his beloved Scott. He enjoyed and praised an easy, urbane mixture of ‘earnest’ and ‘game’. As his successor in his Cambridge Chair said in his inaugural lecture,¹ in which

¹ J. A. W. Bennett, *The Humane Medievalist, An Inaugural Lecture*, Cambridge, 1965.

these phrases are quoted, 'a favourite couplet of Dunbar's sums up his views of the whole duty and delight of man:

Man, please thy Maker and be merry
And give not for this world a cherry.'

He gave an impression to the world in general of a resolute cheerfulness and equanimity, too resolute perhaps to be wholly convincing; and his constant emphasis on 'gentillesse' and 'curtesye' on the one hand, and on hearty, earthy, good-fellowship on the other, had something of the over-emphasis of one who admires and longs to possess qualities that are not naturally his. Only those whose own emotions are extremely powerful need to feel 'distrust or dislike' of emotions, and it might be said that Lewis never wholly came to terms with his inheritance from his father's side. It breaks out disquietingly in his fictions and strongly colours much of his work as an apologist and as a scholar, not merely in what he himself recognized: his father's 'fatal bent towards dramatisation and rhetoric' which he said: 'I speak of the more freely, since I inherit it.' It is felt in an underlying violence of feeling that led him to exaggeration and extravagance in the conduct of what is presented as a purely intellectual argument; while, on the other hand, his fear of the emotions led to what seems at times an almost wilful refusal to recognize what the work he is discussing is about, as distinct from what metaphysical ideas or moral attitudes it inculcates. However this may be, he gave both in life and in his works the impression of an extremely powerful and original personality, 'formidable', as his friend, Nevill Coghill, has called him. He aroused warm affection, loyalty, and devotion in his friends, and feelings of almost equal strength among innumerable persons who knew him only through his books. But he also aroused strong antipathy, disapproval, and distaste among some of his colleagues and pupils, and among some readers. It was impossible to be indifferent to him.

His parents had only two children, both boys, of whom he was the younger by three years. When he was seven years old and his brother had gone off to boarding school, his father moved into a much larger house than the one he had been born in, a house which Lewis said 'is almost a major character in my story'. He described himself as

a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles. Also, of endless books. My father

bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing-room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient shade of my parents' interests, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks in a field has of finding a new blade of grass.

He remained throughout life an omnivorous reader with a phenomenal memory for what he read and a generous readiness to find pleasure of very varying kinds. One sometimes feels that the word 'unreadable' had no meaning for him. To sit opposite him in Duke Humphrey when he was moving steadily through some huge double-columned folio in his reading for his Oxford History was to have an object lesson in what concentration meant. He seemed to create a wall of stillness around him. He also discovered very early the joy of writing, being driven to make up stories, he supposed, by his 'extreme manual clumsiness' which forbade him to make anything else, though it did not prevent him from drawing. His early stories combined his passion for 'dressed animals' with his love of knights in armour and were concerned with 'chivalrous mice and rabbits who rode out in complete mail to kill not giants but cats'. From this he proceeded to invent 'Animal-Land', a country that had to be brought up to date when his brother, whose 'secret country' was India, came home for the holidays. This led him from romancing to historiography and he set about 'writing a full history of Animal-Land', from his own to his brother's 'period'.

When Lewis was nine his mother died of cancer leaving her two small sons in the care of a bewildered, bereaved father. The loss of their mother and their father's inability to achieve an easy and natural relation with his sons drove the brothers into an absorbing *solitude à deux*, in which their imaginative world and, for the younger of them, 'the sure companionship of books' replaced the normal pleasures that growing boys find in exploring a world outside the narrow circle of childhood. In addition, his experiences at what appear to have been from his account of them a truly appalling series of schools fostered in Lewis an extreme and almost morbid distrust of any society larger than a small, closely united group.

He was first sent, when just under ten, to a decaying

preparatory school, run by a crazy clergyman, which he has described under the name of 'Belsen'. The few remaining boarders—for the school was on the verge of packing-up when he went there—found what consolation they could in standing 'foursquare against the common enemy', and Lewis himself said very justly that he suspected that this pattern, occurring twice so early in his life, had unduly biased his whole outlook:

To this day the vision of the world which comes most naturally to me is one in which 'we two' or 'we few' (and in a sense 'we happy few') stand together against something stronger and larger. Hence, while friendship has been by far the chief source of my happiness, acquaintance or general society has always meant little to me, and I cannot quite understand why a man should wish to know more people than he can make real friends of.

'Belsen' came to an end in 1910 and Lewis was sent for one term as a weekly boarder to Campbell College. This he described as being like an English Public School before Arnold. From there he went to a preparatory school at Malvern, his brother having passed through this to Malvern College. Here he seems to have been happier, and here he discovered a third passion—to add to his passion for beast-fables and for the world of medieval chivalry—the passion for 'pure "Northernness" . . . a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity'. He came to it through Rackham's illustrations to stories from Wagner and records of *The Ring*, which led him to the prose and verse *Eddas* and any translations of the Sagas that he could lay hands on.

This childish passion for the 'North' provides a clue to much in Lewis's work as critic and scholar. He never felt a comparable imaginative commitment to the Mediterranean world. Although so much of his work was concerned with the debt of English Literature to the classics and with the literature of the Renaissance in particular, no vision of clear and brilliant sunshine, of noble and humane landscapes in the countries of the vine and the olive, or of cities, large and small, with splendid public monuments ever rivalled the enchantment of the 'North'; as the simple loyalties of the *comitatus* were never replaced for him by the more complex loyalties of the 'city'. The sadness and sternness of the northern world as reflected in its literature appealed to something very deep in his nature. It was an attraction to a conception that was wholly literary and imaginative; it never drew him to travel northwards to relate his personal vision of 'Northernness' to the sensuous experience of living in northern

lands; just as his later interest in things medieval and the 'School of Chartres' never led him to visit France and the great French Cathedrals, and he was content to write on the Renaissance without feeling, as most Renaissance scholars feel, the need constantly to visit Italy. No doubt he could have 'proved' by argument that visiting Iceland would teach one nothing relevant about the Sagas and that a journey to Ferrara would add nothing to a proper appreciation of the *Orlando Furioso*, in the same way as he argued with Eustace Tillyard over what he stigmatized as the 'Personal Heresy', the belief that one meets a writer in his works. It was the strength, and the weakness, of Lewis's criticism that it relied so wholly, for all its depth of learning, on an intensely personal, imaginative response to concepts derived from reading and introspection.

From the comparative happiness of his preparatory school he passed to Malvern College, of which he gave a horrifying description, and where he remained hardly more than a year. He was transferred to a private tutor in Surrey, a man who he said came as near to being 'a purely logical entity' as any man could:

The idea that human beings should exercise their vocal organs for any purpose except that of communicating or discovering truth was to him preposterous. The most casual remark was taken as a summons to disputation.

In his two years in Surrey he enjoyed a daily routine that seemed to him, as he said, ideal: work all morning, a solitary walk all the afternoon, more work between tea and dinner, and talk between dinner and bedtime. He also discovered the pleasures of argument and laid the foundations of his own superlative skill in an art that he perhaps overvalued, as well as acquiring one of the most enviable of all his gifts, the power to read rapidly in Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and German. He won a classical scholarship to University College, Oxford, at the close of 1916 and went up for a term in the summer of 1917 as a member of the O.T.C. He arrived in the front-line trenches as a second lieutenant on his nineteenth birthday, was wounded in April 1918, and returned to Oxford to take up his scholarship in January 1919. On account of his war service, he was excused from Responsions, so that his incapacity to satisfy the examiners in elementary mathematics did not prevent his entering the University.

Lewis took a First in Greats in 1922 and followed this with a First in English in 1923. He was elected at once to a Lectureship at University College and to a Fellowship at Magdalen in

1925. He remained at Magdalen until 1954, when he went to Cambridge to be the first holder of the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature, and a Fellow of Magdalen. The most important event of his early years at Oxford was his conversion to Christianity, the theme of his autobiography. (Another 'huge and complex episode' in which he said that his 'earlier hostility to the emotions was very fully and variously avenged' he declared that he was not at liberty to write about.) His conversion, in his own account, was a process of intellectual discovery, the discovery of the relevance of orthodox Christianity as a coherent system of thought to his whole intellectual and moral life. His religious writings were largely apologetic, attacking fallacies in current objections, and providing, as Dr. Austin Farrer has said, 'a positive exhibition of the force of Christian ideas, morally, imaginatively, and rationally'. He won for himself an immense audience in England, and later in America, with such works as *The Pilgrim's Progress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism* (1933), *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), his series of broadcast talks, *The Great Divorce* (1946), and *Miracles* (1947). During the same period, the late thirties and the forties, he wrote his three 'inter-planetary' novels: *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945).

During his first years as a tutor Lewis was not overburdened with teaching. There were so few men reading English at Magdalen that, to make up his tutorial hours, he taught Political Science to Magdalen men reading History and Modern Greats. He also assisted Percy Simpson in teaching textual criticism to research students in English. Lewis was not a born tutor, and though some of his undergraduate pupils have given testimony to the stimulus of his teaching, others found their tutorial hours uncomfortable; but he was a born lecturer. He was a master of exposition, illustration, and timing. His most famous Oxford lectures were the two bi-weekly courses he called 'Prolegomena to Medieval Studies' and 'Prolegomena to Renaissance Studies', in which he reduced to order and clarity, and illuminated with wit and imagination, a vast range of recondite reading. The substance of these famous lectures is embodied in his posthumously published book *The Discarded Image* (1964). But perhaps one of the most significant of his contributions to the study of English Literature at Oxford was the part he played with his friend Professor J. R. R. Tolkien in establishing a syllabus for the Final Honour School which embodied his belief in the value

of medieval (especially Old English) literature, his conviction that a proper study of modern literature required the linguistic training that the study of earlier literature gave, and his sense of the continuity of English literature. He expounded and defended his ideal syllabus in two papers reprinted in *Rehabilitations* (1939). The case is, as always with Lewis, argued with great force and persuasiveness, and the syllabus, which remained in force for over twenty years, was in many ways an admirable one. It had, however, one unfortunate consequence. In order to make time for a more extended study of earlier literature and to preserve the principle of continuity, the study of English Literature ended at 1830 and a paper on the Victorian Age remained as an optional extra paper which almost nobody offered. This meant that in the period when Victorian Literature was coming into the domain of scholarship, Oxford made virtually no contribution to the development of techniques of dealing with the problems presented by this vast, untidy period of genius, except in the all too short period when Humphry House was in Oxford after the Second World War.

Lewis established his reputation as a scholar with his first book, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936). This remains a great and profoundly original contribution to literary history. Whether one agrees or disagrees, in detail or in large, with its thesis, after reading this book one's whole imagination of the past has been extended and changed. Lewis recovered for the ordinary reader what had been lost for centuries, the power to read allegory and to respond to the allegorical mode of thinking. He was able to do so because he was a born allegorist himself. His imagination was stirred by ideas and concepts and their congruity, and they came to life in his mind almost as persons. He was, besides, a moralist to the depths of his being, and was deeply moved by allegory's power to embody moral concepts and illuminate moral experience. But, in addition, *The Allegory of Love* is written by a man who loved literature and had an extraordinary power of stimulating his readers to curiosity and enthusiasm. In his first book Lewis revealed his two supreme gifts: a range of wide and exact learning with a power of imaginative response to individual works that continually sets them in a fresh light. It remains, I think, his greatest work, and he was wise not to attempt to revise it. I sometimes regret, however, that he did not ever find time and opportunity to modify or correct, in an appendix or an article, some of its statements.

His second major contribution to scholarship in these early Oxford years, a work as influential in its own way as *The Allegory of Love*, was *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). This became in England (though not in America, where the attack on Milton never had the force it had in England) the orthodox defence of Milton's epic against the strictures of T. S. Eliot, Dr. Leavis, and others. It has great merits, not least in its clear and brilliant distinction between the virtues of primary and secondary epic, its powerful defence of Milton's style as appropriate to his conception of his subject, and its skill in bringing a knowledge of contemporary speculation on topics such as the nature of angels to the elucidation of Milton's poem. It is marred by an obsessive concern with the reader's morals, which turns *Paradise Lost* into a vast cautionary tale and tract for the times, and by a failure to recognize that in Milton and his readers 'the imagination', as Bagehot said, 'has a sympathy of its own'. The book also shows all the signs of having been hastily put together, and breaks down towards the middle into a series of chapters on aspects of *Paradise Lost*. It is the least satisfactory and the least attractive of Lewis's critical works, smelling both of the lecture-room and of the popular pulpit. But in spite of defects in conception and manner, it is the work of a powerful and subtle mind, and is a bold attempt to make *Paradise Lost* in our age what Milton hoped it would be in his own, 'doctrinal to a nation'. It contains also passages of brilliant and profound generalization, such as the brief account of Virgil as one who 'added a new dimension to poetry', and constantly picks out for comment lines and phrases whose import once he has commented on them one can never again ignore. It is also, like all his books, eminently readable by virtue of the unfailing liveliness, gusto, and wit with which it is written.

In the early 1940's, when I returned to Oxford as a tutor, Lewis was by far the most impressive and exciting person in the Faculty of English. He had behind him a major work of literary history; he filled the largest lecture-room available for his lectures; and the Socratic Club, which he founded and over which he presided, for the free discussion of religious and philosophic questions, was the most flourishing and influential of undergraduate societies. In spite of this, when the Merton Professorship of English Literature fell vacant in 1946, the electors passed him over and recalled his own old tutor, F. P. Wilson, from London to fill the Chair. In doing so they probably had the support of many, if not a majority, of the Faculty; for by this

time a suspicion had arisen that Lewis was so committed to what he himself called 'hot-gospelling' that he would have had little time for the needs of what had become a very large undergraduate school and for the problems of organization and supervision presented by the rapidly growing numbers of research students in English Literature. In addition, a good many people thought that shoemakers should stick to their lasts and disliked the thought of a professor of English Literature winning fame as an amateur theologian; and, while undoubtedly there were a good many people in Oxford who disliked Christian apologetics *per se*, there were others who were uneasy at Lewis's particular kind of apologetic, disliking both its method and its manner. These last considerations were probably the strongest, and accounted for the fact that when, in the following year, a second Chair in English Literature was established his name was again not put forward. Three years later, in 1950, he stood, with a most impressive list of supporters (virtually all Heads of Houses and most of his own Faculty signed the nomination paper) for election to the Professorship of Poetry. This ancient eighteenth-century Chair provides Oxford (and of recent years the national press) with a certain amount of excitement every five years, since the occupant is elected not by a board of electors but by a general vote of Convocation. On this occasion the cry was raised that the Professor of Poetry should be a poet, and Lewis, in spite of his powerful list of supporters, was defeated in favour of the poet Cecil Day Lewis.

If Lewis was wounded by these rebuffs, he was far too reserved to show it; and he was far too disciplined, and essentially generous, a person to allow any disappointment he may have felt to breed a sense of grievance or grudge. He had besides many consolations: in the devotion of his friends, in a world-wide reputation as a writer on religious subjects, which led to a world-wide correspondence in which he gave freely of his thought and his time to many unknown persons who appealed to him for help and counsel, and in his work and his imaginative life. He withdrew to some extent from university affairs—service on the Board of the Faculty and on its committees and the supervision and examination of research students—and concentrated on the preparation of the volume of the Oxford History of English Literature which he had been commissioned to write. He was also occupied with the writing of a series of seven books for children, the 'Chronicles of Narnia', which began with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in 1950. This series which is very highly

admired by some amateurs of children's books, and is immensely popular with young readers, differs from many children's books of fame in not having been written for the delectation of any particular child or children. The 'Chronicles of Narnia' have their source in Lewis's own childish private world, in his friendship with J. R. R. Tolkien, who was at the same time engaged on his cycle, *The Lord of the Rings*, and in the influence upon him of the mind and personality of Charles Williams, whom he came to know through admiration for his novels. Williams was in Oxford during the war, working at the Oxford University Press whose London Office had moved to Oxford, and until his early death in 1945 was the most intimate of Lewis's friends during his middle years. The influence of Williams's 'spiritual thrillers' can be felt in such very different works as Lewis's 'Chronicles of Narnia' and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and *The Cocktail Party*, and Williams's interest in, and fascination with, esoteric thought, the magical tradition, and the occult found a ready response in Lewis's imagination. But Williams's influence went far beyond the attraction of his personality and the originality of his imagination. He gave a new depth and resonance to Lewis's thought by his doctrine of 'co-inherence' and by the inclusiveness of his concept of Christian love. Williams was a member of a group of Lewis's friends that met regularly and read to each other what they were writing. The closeness and intimacy of Lewis's inner circle of friends at Oxford and his comparative isolation from professional colleagues outside his chosen circle accounts in some degree for the one-sidedness and idiosyncrasy of his second major contribution to literary studies, his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama* (1954).

The merits of this book are very great indeed. It is, to begin with, a genuine literary history. It is perfectly apparent which poets and which poems Lewis thinks 'the best', and the book exemplifies again and again his gift for summing up the peculiar virtues of a work, and his genius for the brief, pregnant quotation that gives the quiddity of a writer. But he respected the nature of his commission and attempted to provide a continuous narrative history of literature in the century. The volume satisfies his own criterion of a good literary history: it tells us what works exist and puts them in their setting. The book is also brilliantly written, compulsively readable, and constantly illuminated by sentences that are as true as they are witty. Who else could have written a literary history that continually arouses delighted laughter? There is hardly a page that does not

stimulate and provoke thought. Like all critics, Lewis wrote best on those writers and those works that he loved. The chapter on 'The Close of the Middle Ages in Scotland', the whole of the section on Sidney, the noble pages on 'the unsurpassed grace and majesty' of Hooker's 'model of the universe' are models of judicious, encomiastic criticism, worthy in the vigour and beauty of their phrasing of their themes. If I had to select any one passage from this rich book that I would have given much to have written, it would be the pages on the sonnets of Shakespeare. They succeed in saying things that are both original and profoundly true of what in Lewis's own terminology we may call the most 'Golden' of all English poems. Had he written always thus 'it would have been vain to blame and useless to praise him'. In addition, the discussion of the Reformation in England and the temper of early Protestantism is as full of insight as charity. But the book is marred throughout by an insistent polemical purpose, expressed in the title of its first chapter 'New Learning and New Ignorance'. This extraordinary chapter, in which eight pages are devoted to 'magic' and only two to 'education', is devoted to proving by skilfully selected quotation and a complete refusal of imaginative sympathy that Humanism was inhumane and that the Humanists, grudgingly thanked for their labours in the recovery and editing of ancient texts, otherwise did 'immense harm'. Though the index gives many references to Erasmus, there is no consideration of Erasmus's central position in the early English Renaissance and Reformation, and when one looks up the references one finds that they are nearly all derogatory. It is never suggested that reforms in education, and the Humanist insistence on the aesthetic merits of ancient literature, could have any connexion with the appearance of our 'Golden Age'; and the inadequacy of the discussion of 'rhetoric' (included in the two pages on 'education') shows how out of touch Lewis was with contemporary scholarship in his own field. An even more startling example of his remoteness from 'the republic of scholarship' was his revival, without showing any awareness that he was reviving a long-ago exploded view, of the notion that the metaphysical style should be rechristened the 'Bartasian'.

In the same year as he published this book, Lewis moved to Cambridge to be the first holder of the Chair in English Medieval and Renaissance Literature. When first approached he was unwilling to leave Oxford and the Chair was indeed offered to someone else. Fortunately, the 'second string' declined,

partly on account of having heard that Lewis was changing his mind, for it was obvious that this ought to be Lewis's chair. He retained his home at Headington and spent most week-ends and his vacations there, living in Magdalene during term. The move was in every way a right one and he came to love Cambridge, which he described as being, compared with Oxford, 'a don's university'. He found there not merely warm friendship but also the pleasures a wide acquaintance can bring. The books that came out of his Cambridge period were slight works compared with his earlier books; but they were far more balanced and genial in their temper. He lost, I think, in Cambridge, though the change may have been due to the mellowing of age, the rather hectoring tone that came from the feeling that he stood with a few friends against an unsympathetic world. Although he described himself in his inaugural lecture as a kind of dinosaur, one of the last living examples of an 'Old Western Man', the tone in which he did so was notably humorous and relaxed: and his short book *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), though it echoes his earlier emphasis on the enjoyment of literature as an end in itself, and other themes from his debate with Tillyard, is disinterested in tone and has a humility and a sensitiveness that his earlier argumentative manner lacked. Its final pages are a moving tribute to the power of great literature to enable us to 'become a thousand men and yet remain' ourselves. 'Here,' he wrote, 'as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.'

In 1957 Lewis married. His wife, Joy Gresham, was grievously ill at the time of their marriage and her case was regarded as virtually hopeless by her doctors: the marriage took place in hospital. She recovered sufficiently to give him a few years of profound happiness and of deep experience in sharing her pain and mourning her loss. His own health broke down in 1963 and forced his resignation from his Chair. He died on 22 November 1963 at the age of 65.

HELEN GARDNER