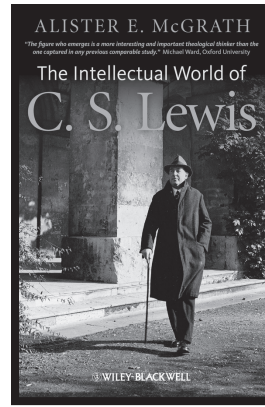


C. S. LEWIS A LIFE: ECCENTRIC GENIUS, RELUCTANT PROPHET.

ALISTER E. MCGRATH. LONDON:
HODDER & STOUGHTON, 2013. \$27.20.
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THE INTELLECTUAL WORLD OF C. S. LEWIS.

ALISTER E. MCGRATH. CHICHESTER:
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REDISCOVERING C. S. LEWIS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Interest in C. S. Lewis continues to grow. It is remarkable that this curious, flawed scholar, who lived most of his life a bachelor, and all his working life in the ultimate English academic institutions, should be held in such regard for the practical common sense of his popular writings, the subtlety of his fiction and, increasingly, for the insights of his theology.

The semi-biographical *Shadowlands* productions in the 1990s, followed by the more recent *Narnia* movies have, of course, contributed to this attention. Although this too is somewhat surprising as the movies represented their books in very mixed fashion. They certainly do not do for Lewis what the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy achieved for Tolkien. Indeed, *Prince Caspian* the movie seems to bend the story deliberately to mimic the battle effects of Peter Jackson's epic, whilst *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* sinks so deeply into sentimentality as to be almost unwatchable. Most scholarly attention to Lewis quietly purports to ignore the Hollywood renditions of Lewis and Narnia. Little justification, it seems, is needed for attention to such a prolific

writer across a range of literary genres. However, if excuse was needed, the fact that 2013 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Lewis's death seems to suffice for another surge in publications. This is indeed part of the context of Alister McGrath's twin works on Lewis.

Like Lewis, Alister McGrath is a prolific author who has spent most of his adult life in Oxford. He is best known for his theological writing, especially his work on the relation of theology and science, and he has also entered the apologetics fray against Richard Dawkins. But McGrath is also an historian who has published important studies of reformation and modern thought. In the midst of this huge output, he has found time to produce biographies, notably of John Calvin (1990), J. I. Packer (1997), T. F. Torrance (2006) and now, C. S. Lewis. However, Lewis seems to have been so fruitful a study for McGrath, that he has in fact given us two books – one, a more or less standard biography; the other, a collection of essays examining aspects of Lewis's thought.

C. S. Lewis: A Life, subtitled *Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, is unembarrassedly timed to

appear for the fiftieth anniversary of Lewis's death on 22 November 1963. However, this is not a slight work, merely conceived to cash in on a ready market, with the appetite for Lewisiana seemingly insatiable. This is a long work, covering Lewis's entire life and indeed his "afterlife" in the form of a final chapter on "The Lewis Phenomenon." At 379 pages of the main text, McGrath's study matches for length George Sayer's *Jack: a life of C. S. Lewis* (1994), regarded by many as the most satisfying biography to date, and is substantially longer than the perspectives given by Green and Hooper (1974), A. N. Wilson (1990) and the more recent *The Narnian* by Allan Jacobs (2005).

Fifty years on, it is increasingly the case that scholars of Lewis have no personal connections to weave into their studies. The great quality of Sayer's work is his intimate understanding of Lewis the man. McGrath acknowledges he does not bring that sort of acquaintance to his portrayal of Lewis. This does not mean, however that his own biography is irrelevant. McGrath points out (xv) that he shares with Lewis an Irish childhood, familiarity with Oxford and Cambridge, an early atheism, Anglicanism, and an interest in apologetics. That so, McGrath's is not a standard biographical approach. With one notable exception, explored below, the focus of this "biography" is not the man, or even, as in an intellectual biography, the writer, but the writer's *works*. In this McGrath claims Lewis's own example as authority.

As Lewis emphasised throughout the 1930s, the important thing about authors is the texts they write. What really matters is what those texts themselves say. Authors should not themselves be a "spectacle"; they are rather the "set of spectacles" through which we as readers see ourselves, the world, and the greater scheme of things of which we are a part. Lewis thus has surprisingly little interest in the personal history of the great English poet John Milton (1608–1674), or the political and social context within which he wrote. What really mattered were Milton's writings – his ideas. The way Lewis believed we should approach Milton must be allowed to shape the way we in turn approach Lewis. Throughout this work, wherever possible, I have tried to engage with his writings, exploring what they say, and assessing their significance (xv).

This is problematic, and suggests both the strengths and the weaknesses of this volume from McGrath. Lewis, when writing on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, was most definitely interested in the literary work itself, not, as it happened, the life of the blind, seventeenth-century author. Importantly, nowhere

would he recommend mere attention to the text as a biographical tool. Indeed, he was deeply sceptical of any attempt to read behind a text to the context or life of the author.

I have watched reviewers reconstructing the genesis of my own books in just this way... My impression is that in the whole of my experience not one of these guesses has on any one point been right; that the method shows a record of 100 per cent failure. You would expect that by mere chance they would hit as often as they miss. But it is my impression that they do no such thing. I can't remember a single hit.¹

As it happens, McGrath does not follow his espoused method at all consistently. It is evident that he is at his most insightful when discussing Lewis's writings, but these explorations are by no means the bulk of the book. Attention is given, as expected, to the familiar phases of Lewis's life: his childhood and loss of mother, the difficult relationship with his father and uneven schooling, war service, Mrs Moore, conversion, scholarship, authorship, public profile, marriage. The point is that these are accessed largely through traditional biographical sources, especially the correspondence now available in three vast volumes. The literary writings (with the possible exception of the early *Pilgrim's Regress*) provide little biographical fodder. Lewis would not have expected them to do so. Yet you do get the sense throughout this biography, that McGrath is happiest, most comfortable, when dealing with the writings. The result is a *Life* which falls strangely flat at times. There is little of the intimacy of Sayer or the iconoclastic verve of Wilson. An example of this is McGrath's limited interest in Lewis's decision in 1951 to decline the offer of a C. B. E. McGrath cites the incident merely for the fact that the offer would have been "a boost for his morale" (248). But why did Lewis decline? In his letter to the Prime Minister's Secretary, Lewis cites political reasons.² How soundly were these based? Do they reflect something significant about his own politics? Or was Lewis being disingenuous? Was he at this point fearful of raising his popular profile still further? These are questions potentially of biographical significance, but they fall unexamined, outside McGrath's literary-driven radar.

There is, however, one genuinely biographical detail which McGrath pursues with vigour. The process of Lewis's conversion is memorably

¹ C. S. Lewis "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism" in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), 159–60.

² *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Volume III, Narnia, Cambridge and Joy* (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 2007), 147.

described in the autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*, published in 1955. In this account he dates his coming to believe in God (though not yet the divinity of Christ) to Trinity Term (late April to June) 1929. Primarily through a close reading of Lewis's letters of the period, McGrath argues that Lewis's recollection, a quarter of a century later, was out by a full year and that, in fact, the conversion to theism took place in the second quarter of 1930. This places Lewis's spiritual awakening much closer to his life-changing conversation with J. R. R. Tolkien and subsequent acceptance of Christ in September 1931. McGrath makes a convincing case here. His account certainly fits better with what can be determined about changes to Lewis's habits at the time. Michael Ward, another scholar of Lewis's writings, concedes that this re-dating is "undeniable" and declaims, "How we all missed this for so long is astonishing!"

The full significance of McGrath's finding on Lewis's conversion is yet to be explored. It is a genuine new interpretation, but one which ironically demonstrates the strange unevenness of this biography. The method McGrath espouses – reading the writings not the writer – could not have delivered this insight. What he has gained, is gained through the much more prosaic biographical exercise of comparing accounts with known facts.

The letters are essential and immensely valuable sources. Lewis was a great letter writer both in quantity and content. McGrath's account of Lewis's life owes much to these now collected and published glimpses of both the mundane and the profound. The result is a biography which opens many windows on Lewis's mind, though less on the material aspects of his life. One disappointing feature is the photographs. Twentieth century history offers a rich repository of images. Over 40 photographs are included in this volume but, as many are well known, and about half are stock photos of scenes and buildings, or streets "down which Lewis would have walked," they add less than they might. An opportunity missed.

The women in Lewis's life are a crucial aspect of any serious biography. The loss of his mother, the nature of the relationship with Mrs Moore, Ruth Pitter and Joy Davidman – are all addressed in McGrath's account. Of these subjects he perhaps adds most in his account of the first two. Lewis's relationships with the poet Ruth Pitter and with Joy Davidman are less satisfactorily depicted. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Lewis was very close to Ruth Pitter. McGrath seems uninterested in exploring why this intimacy never developed further. On Davidman, McGrath takes a largely negative view, depicting her as manipulative, and only grudgingly acknowledging her influence on Lewis's later

writings. This is in contrast to the much more sympathetic picture put forward by Sayer. It may well be that we must await a full-length study of Lewis by a woman before we will gain significant new insight into the place of women in his life. In the volume under review, the theme of unevenness is evident once more.

There is no question but that this is a significant contribution to our understanding of Lewis. McGrath's skill as a theological reader of Lewis's works adds a layer which neither Sayer nor Wilson (especially Wilson) provide. There are also some revelations on the life itself, notably the point of conversion. Nevertheless, important questions remain unanswered, even unaddressed, making this far from the definitive treatment of this complex Christian.

In parallel with his research for the biography, McGrath came to see that a number of themes he wanted to develop required more extensive treatment than the biographical format allowed. Thus, almost simultaneously with the biography, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* appeared. This is a collection of eight essays on various aspects of Lewis's thought and context. Here McGrath is on very familiar territory. Many of other his historical works are strong on the intellectual context of ideas.

The first essay clearly reflects, and in part repeats, the argument in the biography for re-dating Lewis's conversion to theism. This is expanded into a consideration of the nature of autobiography as found in *Surprised by Joy*. As a short study, which introduces some of the critical theory around autobiography this is very useful and suggests some important controls in approaching one of Lewis's most quoted works.

If McGrath's study of *Surprised by Joy* turns on an account of Lewis's conversion, the second essay tackles the nature of his atheism. Here Oxford and the philosophical "New Look" Lewis adopted there is linked to realist philosophy, the emerging psychological theories of the 1920s and to scientific reductionism. McGrath makes the important point that Lewis's later criticisms of aspects of these positions are the stronger for the fact he once himself held to them. This is a stimulating chapter. If read alongside David Downing's *The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis's Journey to Faith*,³ it suggests a number of threads for understanding Lewis and his sceptical post-WWI generation of Oxford intellectuals.

Two crucial aspects of Lewis's thought and writing are examined in the next essays. For Lewis, as for Tolkien, "myth" is an immensely fruitful

3 David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis's Journey to Faith* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2002).

literary and intellectual category. Myths expand the imagination precisely because God designs them to. The Christian myth is not merely some invented story, but the “grand narrative” of the Christian faith itself, which supplies Christianity’s primary framework, from which doctrines are drawn, but to which they are secondary. McGrath’s discussion touches on issues of *mythos* and *logos*, reminiscent of the recent exploration of these categories by Kevin Vanhoozer.⁴

A second group of motifs frequently encountered in Lewis is that of light and sight – “ocular” imagery, which McGrath explores for hints of Lewis’s understanding of truth itself. Christianity functions less to inform than to illuminate. “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.” This, indeed, is a vital element in Lewis’s apologetic genius. As his friend Austen Farrer would say of him on his death, “his real power was not proof, it was depiction”⁵

In chapters five and six McGrath turns directly to Lewis’s apologetics. First he attempts to place more accurately Lewis’s much-contested “argument from desire,” especially as found in *Mere Christianity*. “Desire” is inextricably linked to Lewis’s concept of “Joy.” It is thus not to be limited to mere want or lust, but it implies a vision of something more, something beyond the individual. But, crucially, Lewis employs it “not to prove, but to depict.” His argument is inferential rather than deductive. This is characteristic of Lewis’s broader apologetic method, which is explored in chapter six, the briefest of the essays in the book.

Chapter seven contains what is inescapably the weakest of the essays. McGrath sets out to explore Lewis’s Anglicanism. This is the most unsatisfying essay in the collection. Beyond the obvious fact that Lewis was a member of the Church of England and admired Richard Hooker there is little data to explore. The best that McGrath can offer to the question whether Lewis was characteristically Anglican is that “it is impossible to answer... in the negative.” Hardly a striking conclusion, and indicative of a chapter which adds little to the book.

Much more suggestive, exciting even, is the final chapter on “Lewis as a Theologian.” Here the true significance of McGrath’s twin publications on Lewis is found. Some might be surprised to discover that for one of the key figures in current theological debate to treat Lewis seriously as a *theologian*, is

a fairly new development. Lewis has often been relegated dismissively as a populariser who, when his formulations are critically examined, fails to deliver a sustainable technical theology. This attitude has begun to change. Another Oxford theologian, Paul Fiddes, recently explored central issues in Lewis’s thought, arguing that in his discussions of Trinity, incarnation and life that Lewis is “touching doctrine with the glow of imagination.”⁶ As McGrath points out, criticisms of Lewis have turned on assumptions that Germanic/systematic approaches to theology are the benchmark. Yet, assessed on his own terms, Lewis emerges as a genuine theologian grounded in a thoroughly sophisticated method. When taken with chapters three and four of this volume (on myth and on vision respectively – see above), McGrath’s final essay points to some intriguing possibilities for future Lewis studies.

Fifty years after Lewis’s death, he has *become* a theologian – not because Lewis himself has changed, but because attitudes toward him are shifting. Lewis is now “received” as a theologian by a large number of individuals, who find in Lewis certain intellectual and cultural virtues that they do not find elsewhere. The perception has become the reality. I would venture to suggest that it is only a matter of time before courses on “The Theology of C. S. Lewis” make their appearance in leading seminaries and universities, especially in the United States. Indeed, I am tempted to develop one such course myself.⁷

It is in identifying this prospect that McGrath makes his best contribution to Lewis studies, confirming that, of the two books, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* is the more significant. *C. S. Lewis: A Life* is a worthy addition to Lewis biography. However, apart from the re-dating of Lewis’s conversion, it does not break any moulds. By contrast, the prospect that Lewis might be found to be, not just a communicator of “mere Christianity,” but the key representative of a rich way of *doing* theology has the potential to truly shake things up.

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4 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

5 Austin M. Farrer, *The Brink of Mystery*, ed. Charles C. Conti (London: SPCK, 1976), 46.

6 Paul Fiddes, “On Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, eds. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward; Cambridge Companions to Religion Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94.

7 McGrath, *Intellectual World*, 178–79.