

Review Essay

McGrath's biography of C.S. Lewis

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Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life. Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 2013. 431 pp. ISBN 978-1-4143-3935-1.

The plan laid out in the Preface of this new general biography of C.S. Lewis is both ambitious and ambiguous. The ambiguity comes in several modes. First, while the author claims that ‘this biography adds to what is known about Lewis’s life’, he also provides some reason to doubt whether it is actually a new general biography: the book is declared to be ‘not concerned with documenting every aspect of Lewis’s life’ and ‘not another rehearsal of the vast army of facts and figures concerning his life’. This seems unduly dismissive in so far as no such rehearsal, in biographical form, is mentioned or known to exist to the present reviewer; there may well be a market for it. What is promised instead is a variety of further ambiguities. On the basis of Owen Barfield’s useful distinction of ‘three Lewises’ (in McGrath’s modified order: imaginative, apologetic, and academic), the question is raised how the three are related; but then it appears to be suggested that the answer will be provided by an exploration of the ‘connections between Lewis’s external and internal worlds’. One wonders whether this issue is understood to be the same as that of the three Lewises.

There are also repeated assertions that the book’s focus will be on Lewis’s writings; the overall aim will be ‘to understand him – above

all, his ideas, and how these found expression in his writings'. If this is not precisely the stuff of biography, it is certainly an attractive pursuit and, as we are duly reminded, a Lewisian approach to Lewis. But a shadow falls over this happy prospect at the end of the Preface. We are informed there that 'some of the scholarly questions that emerged' have been 'avoided' and transferred to 'a more academic study'. It was at an early stage of his research, says the author, that the need for this measure 'became clear'. None of this clarity is shared with the reader. As for precise consequences, the only one stated is that 'notes and bibliography have been kept to the bare minimum' – a remarkable assertion for a book with 774 end notes and a nine-page small-print list of 'secondary studies', many of which are never referred to; only the list of Lewis's own writings is definitely lean. In an end note, the 'more academic volume' turns out to have the tantalizing title *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis*. 'Scholarly questions' thus appear to have somehow shaded into questions about Lewis's scholarly pursuits, which would seem to be a different thing; and it is hard to see how, if Lewis's 'intellectual world' or some unspecified part of it is treated in a different book, the author can fulfil his promise in the present one to help readers '*understand* Lewis – above all, his ideas' and answer the question 'Who helped him craft his intellectual and imaginative vision of reality?'

A final ambiguity is related to the ambitious claims made for this book. While the author has sidelined 'some of the scholarly questions' because his 'concern ... is to tell a story', there is also, as already noted, a certain breeziness about 'facts and figures', based on an intention to provide 'not a work of synopsis, but of analysis' – an 'attempt to identify [the] deeper themes and concerns' of Lewis's life, 'and assess its significance.' Meanwhile the author appears to have few reservations about his own total command of all the available facts, all of Lewis's writings, and all the literature about Lewis at least of the past two decades; and no reservation whatever is added to his claim to provide 'a critical biography'

for which he has been 'checking everything against documentary evidence'.

Assuming that it is possible to fulfil all these various promises in one coherent and balanced biography, we may for purposes of evaluation distinguish 'three McGraths' in relation to Lewis: the analyst, the reader, and the researcher. By and large, the result of inquiry in each of these modes is disappointing. The end result is a book of uneven quality, with more low than high points.

To begin with the research mode is to begin in the field where the book's real victories are scored. Embarrassingly for all Lewis scholars to date, McGrath has been perhaps the first to see for himself what everyone must see when it is pointed out – that Lewis's general carelessness about dates has affected even the date he mentioned for his own conversion from atheism to theism. Another discovery, interesting if less spectacular, concerns Lewis's brief military career in the Somerset Light Infantry. Why Somerset? The very likely answer is given here. In describing the origins of the Oxford Socratic Club, Green and Hooper in their biography merely stated that Lewis, when asked, 'readily accepted the position of president'; but now we learn that there were rules requiring that student societies be supervised by a 'Senior Member' of the university, and Dorothy L. Sayers had been asked first. The tangled and amusing history of Lewis's changeover from Oxford to Cambridge in 1954 is well-researched and, incidentally, the only part of the book offering a well-written, flowing narrative. Generally, this book is strong on historical and institutional backgrounds; and this applies especially to Lewis's Irish roots, which McGrath shares with him.

However, if such passages suggest some pretty wide and deep research, the idea that they are characteristic of the book as a whole is to be resisted. Examples of sloppy and uncritical treatment or simple disregard of relevant sources are so numerous that one is reminded of A.N. Wilson's slapdash biography of 1990. Indeed the nadir is reached when Wilson himself is uncritically quoted in one

of his most deceitful moments – a clearly novelistic, largely fictitious and, as usual, gossipy account of a conversation between Lewis and Joy Davidman (333, note 56). George Sayer, in his charitable review of Wilson's book in 1990, singled out this very passage for a well-founded accusation of inaccuracy. As for simple disregard, when McGrath thinks it 'fair to suggest' that the failure of Lewis's *Dymer* in 1926 marked the end of his dreams of poethood (107), readers who know the *Collected Letters* will wonder why we are not simply referred to Lewis's letter to Arthur Greeves of 18 August 1930, including a long, soul-searching note of March 1926. In that letter and note, Lewis is perhaps as explicit as any failed poet has ever been about the end of his dreams. No need for fair suggestions here.

The 1943 preface to *The Pilgrim's Regress* is interpreted as if it had been written in 1932; the considerable difference between Warnie Lewis's unpublished 'Biography' and the heavily edited 'Memoir' published by Christopher Derrick in 1966 goes unnoticed; Lewis's decision to make weekly confessions, misdated by one year, is suggested to be inspired by anxiety about an 'orgy of egoism' (204), while Lewis was in fact suggesting that the confessions themselves might turn into such an orgy; J.B.S. Haldane, a great scientist, is dispatched as a pathetic 'disillusioned Marxist' (234) in the days when he was not yet disillusioned; Lewis's failure to get a job at Reading in 1922 is ascribed (as Wilson ascribed it) to his own decision against it under pressure from the Moore connection, rather than to the fact, mentioned in his published diary, that the job had been given to someone else; and so on.

In its analytical aspect, what must strike most readers of this biography is its heavy emphasis on two subjects: Narnia and Tolkien. Surely some detailed treatment of these things is in order, and every biographer has a right to his own preferences; but there is, unmistakably, an egregious imbalance with other parts of Lewis's output, and with other friends. Lewis himself appears to have reckoned Tolkien among his 'second class' friends (143), but

the only other friend adequately described, a ‘first class’ friend, is Arthur Greeves – with new and moving glimpses into this silent figure’s private diaries. In comparison with these, Owen Barfield and Charles Williams remain shadowy figures, while fellow convert Bede Griffiths, recipient of many fine letters and dedicatee of *Surprised by Joy*, hardly appears at all. As for Lewis’s works, to mention just one case of imbalance, more than forty pages (and the book’s endpapers) are devoted to ‘Narnia’, but only five pages to the entire Ransom trilogy – whose main significance is suggested to lie in the way it illustrates Lewis’s ‘shift to fiction’ (233).

This ‘shift to fiction’ is one of the book’s key analytical ideas; yet the reality of this shift is not made more plausible than Wilson made it. Dispassionate readers will feel that the idea must have been inspired by a determination to give pride of place to ‘Narnia’ among Lewis’s works. This is also suggested by McGrath’s idea that Lewis’s view of reason and imagination matured only gradually during the 1930s and 1940s, an idea that seems at odds with the assertion (158) that by 1931 ‘the fundamental features of his settled understanding of Christianity were now in place’. Lewis’s view of the relation of reason and imagination surely *was* a fundamental feature. Its development during the 1920s – Lewis’s long controversy with Owen Barfield and his wavering, never completed defection from philosophical idealism – is a crucial episode on which the reader of this biography is left in the dark; the very words *idealist* or *idealism* don’t make a single appearance in the whole book; and the list of secondary literature omits two recent landmark dissertations on Lewis’s thought – one systematic (Norbert Feinendegen, 2008), the other historical (Adam Barkman, 2009). As Lewis wrote in a 1954 letter, ‘the imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic’ (*CL III*, 516-517). There never was a shift *away* from fiction; and in fact McGrath occasionally seems to be well aware of this.

Another key idea announced in the Preface is the way Lewis's 'external and internal worlds' were connected. The only recognizable treatment of this theme is offered along with the revision of Lewis's conversion date. Dates and locations were to Lewis external things, we learn; the conversion was internal; and Lewis saw few if any connections. This is neither 'complex' nor 'fascinating' (xi). A recurring theme is Lewis's 'treaty with reality' which, it is suggested, he slowly came to recognize as an intellectual type of wishful thinking. The phrase is taken from Lewis's description, in *Surprised by Joy*, of his own attitude in 1915-16 to the prospect of serving (and likely dying) in the war. He had decided not to bother about that. This is how the mature man and Christian of 1955 describes, *and endorses*, his own youthful stance; but McGrath treats it as a mere expression of boyish bravado dating from those early days and destined to be modified in the school of life. Indeed, the whole question of how the war affected Lewis is treated with a remarkable disregard for the available evidence and a willingness to accept the shallowly plausible to show how that experience must have played a major role in Lewis's life. The evidence from Lewis's writings consistently contradicts the idea that the Great War as such had much effect on his view of life and the universe. Periods of sustained enemy shelling were an experience he never forgot; but overall, he clearly viewed the war not as the 'destruction of the fixed certainties, values' etc. (123) such as the textbooks tell us it was, but as years of 'absolute suspension and waste' (CL I, 428, letter to his father, Jan. 27th 1919).

While Lewis's 'eccentricity', mentioned in the subtitle, might be developed in several ways, the most obvious way would seem to be a focus on his relationship, as an 'old Western man' or 'dinosaur', to secular modernity. Instead, the four-page discussion of Lewis's famous Cambridge inaugural lecture is consistently off-target; and his eccentricity is explained in predominantly social and institutional terms. Questions about Lewis and modernity keep receding behind the ever intrusive non-biographical question of how he relates to

postmodernity. The subtitle's other adjective, 'reluctant', as applied to 'prophet', is mysterious and seems to have wandered in from Lewis's self-description as a 'reluctant convert'; an explanation given in the Preface is unconvincing. While this review was being written, a paperback version of the book was announced with an extra subtitle – *The Story of the Man Who Created Narnia*.

Finally, there is the promised centrality of Lewis's writings and ideas. His two early volumes of poetry are amply discussed; and toward the end, a fine, long, sensitive discussion of *A Grief Observed* is one of this biography's valuable sections. Lewis's favourites among his own books, in so far as he expressed himself on the point, appear to have been *Perelandra*, joined in time by *Till We Have Faces*. Another was *The Abolition of Man*. About these books, readers of this biography will learn almost nothing. The treatment of *The Abolition of Man* – his masterpiece as, let us say, an 'eccentric prophet' – is shockingly poor and actually serves to raise a suspicion that McGrath hasn't read beyond the first page, and has read hastily even that. On *Miracles*, we hear little apart from chapter 3, which is treated (along with the history of the Socratic Club), as a footnote to Lewis's 1947 debate with Elizabeth Anscombe. His magnum opus on 16th-century English literature is described in a few lines, and *Letters to Malcolm*, his last book, is not mentioned at all.

This brings us to what may be termed a really fatal omission. In itself, it is perhaps no great matter that Lewis's 1946 *Anthology* from the works of George Macdonald is never mentioned (except, in passing, in note 16 to chapter 14). But neither does Macdonald appear in the brief discussion of *The Great Divorce* (232), a book in which he is the central character; and overall, barring a handful of inevitable mentions and one brief but significant one (202, quoting the epigraph of *The Problem of Pain*), George Macdonald is the supremely conspicuous absentee in this biography of C.S. Lewis. If only in view of the author's promise to focus on 'ideas', and to discuss the people who helped Lewis 'craft his intellectual and imaginative vision of reality' (xi), this is hard to excuse.

The omission is, however, perhaps in line with a remarkable discrepancy between Lewis's own exposition and practice of Christianity as we know it from his books and letters on the one hand, and on the other, McGrath's account of what he repeatedly calls Lewis's 'vision of the Christian faith', 'vision of Christianity', or 'Christian vision of reality'. 'For Lewis,' writes McGrath, 'Christianity is the "big picture" which weaves together the strands of experience and observation into a compelling pattern' (222). The long discussion (218-229) of Lewis's *Mere Christianity* conforms to this characterization; but it hardly conforms to *Mere Christianity*. Perhaps for the first time in Lewis scholarship, that book is construed as presenting *two* 'clues to the meaning of the universe', which are further construed as the book's two main lines of argument. Right and Wrong, or the 'argument from morality', is one; the 'argument from desire' is the other (225). In tandem they lead – not to Lewis's own 'practical conclusion' at the end of Book II ('today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side'), or to the serious call to 'a giving up of the self' that concludes Book IV and the whole of *Mere Christianity*, but to an alleged summary borrowed from elsewhere, the famous quote 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen' etc. What is offered here is a distillation from a selection of Lewisian ideas, disguised as an account of Lewis's thought and writings.

As an aside, it should be noted that this tandem of arguments in any case misrepresents the way Lewis often brought up his 'moral argument', namely, as an adjunct or parallel to his 'argument from reason' – a 'further difficulty in Naturalism' (*Miracles*, chapter 5). Indeed, the 'argument from desire' is a crucially different thing from the other two and, arguably, not an argument at all in the sense applicable to them. However, the argument from reason and Lewis's presentation of it are treated by McGrath in a regrettably dismissive and confusing way that seems designed to discourage the reader from further exploration. It is a long way from here to a serious attempt 'to understand Lewis – above all, his ideas'.

To get back to the vision thing; this thing, as such, however grand and satisfying, would clearly have no meaning for Lewis unless it was followed by an attempt at *obedience*. A brief glance at the *Macdonald Anthology*’s table of contents, remembering that this is how Lewis paid tribute and acknowledged his debt to his chief spiritual mentor, George Macdonald, is enough to see how far much of this is removed from McGrath’s account, where the notion of obedience is practically absent. In Macdonald, as Lewis points out in his preface,

it is always the voice of conscience that speaks. He addresses the will: the demand for obedience, for ‘something to be neither more nor less nor other than *done*’ is incessant. Yet in that very voice of conscience every other faculty somehow speaks as well – intellect, and imagination, and humor, and fancy.

Surely Lewis, for all his vastly superior literary talent, would have been a forgotten author now if something very similar was not true for him. Aslan is not a *tame* lion, and we may doubt McGrath has succeeded in taming Lewis. If we are to know Lewis and his work, we shall do well to read his own books and letters rather than this unfocused, over-ambitious and disappointing book about him.

*A list of critical notes from which a selection was used for this review
is simultaneously published online at www.lewisiana.nl/mcgrathbio.*

