

**Laurence Harwood, *C.S. Lewis My Godfather,*
Review by Lydia Newell
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C.S. Lewis, My Godfather: Letters, Photos and Recollections.
Laurence Harwood. 148 pp. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,
2007. ISBN 9780830834983

As the son of C. S. Lewis' longtime friend Cecil Harwood, and as godson of Lewis himself, Laurence Harwood certainly seems in a position to write reliably about Lewis' personal and familial personae. In 'C S Lewis, My Godfather', Harwood compactly stitches together a narrative of Lewis' life with photographs and generous excerpts from Lewis' own letters. Though Lewis' personable descriptions and recollections often steal the show, his letters, combined with Harwood's contributions, together create a mood of familiarity and intimate friendship. Such was the stated goal of this little volume, and in this it pleasantly succeeds.

Harwood groups his recollections around his father's longtime acquaintance with Lewis, briefly sketching selected notable phases of Lewis' adult life. As this sequence of events is governed as much by the Harwood family's life as it is by Lewis', there are occasional ellipses in the narrative; readers unfamiliar with Lewis' life may not come away with a complete grasp of his biography. But this little collection's charm lies in its presentation of Lewis as a beloved, avuncular character in the life of an ordinary enough young man,¹ and its perspective is thus a refreshing departure from the exhaustive or overly reverent portraits that can crop up in accounts of Lewis. For a quick and accurate snapshot of Lewis' keen mind, humane perspectives, and superbly clever humour, these 'letters, photos, and recollections' are an ideal start.

The volume's greatest appeal lies in its presentation, which is most reminiscent of a scrapbook; despite its slim size, its sheer number of reproduced photographs and facsimile letters is impressive. With the exceptions of Hooper's *Through Joy and Beyond* and Gilbert and Kilby's *C.S. Lewis: Images of His World*, rarely have biographical materials on Lewis offered such a simultaneously intellectual and visual portrait. Harwood has gathered artefacts from archives on both sides of the Atlantic. For readers unable to visit the Wade Centre at Wheaton College or the Bodleian Library, this volume offers a welcome glimpse into the visual world of Lewis and adds an appealing dimension to the reprinted letters.

Along with its photographs, Harwood's collection boasts an equally judicious and appealing selection of texts. Chapter Four, 'Walking Tours,' offers the volume's

most memorable images of a young Lewis striding about the countryside with Owen Barfield, Cecil Harwood, and other friends who made up the ad-hoc 'College of Cretaceous Perambulators', named for their amblings across Britain's chalk downs. This chapter relates a few of the amusing mock-academic rituals contrived by these clever young men, and Laurence Harwood here pulls together the dual images of personal camaraderie and deep love of natural beauty that many associate with Lewis. Enjoyably, Lewis' rich descriptions of 'close, smooth grass...very springy to the foot' and 'all the bigness of the downs' are tempered by his occasional grumbling at the tiresome prospect of 'taking lunch' (as opposed to stopping in a pub) and being deprived of a nap after said lunch on a hard, rocky ground in the midst of 'hurricane' winds (25-26). But Lewis' difference from the average grumpy traveller soon becomes apparent:

Barfield and I dropped behind and began composing in Pope-ian couplets a satire on people who arrange walking tours. Nothing could have been happier. At a stroke every source of irritation was magically changed into precious fragments of 'copy'. By the time we had walked three miles we were once more in a position to enjoy the glorious country all round us. (26)

Lewis' gifts for empathy, insight, and compassionate counsel are also especially evident in his letters to the Harwood family throughout the years. Once again, the book's standpoint is unique in its presentation of over three decades of correspondence between the two households. Any reader will be charmed by Lewis' letters to the young Laurence, sprinkled as they are with sketches, light verse, and runic puzzles. Yet Lewis is also characteristically aware of the challenges of growing up. Among the reprinted letters is the wryly insightful missive written by Lewis upon the occasion of a humiliating failure for Harwood at Oxford, in his trademark combination of empathetic awareness and aphoristic image:

I remember only too well what a hopeless oyster to be opened the world seemed at your age. [...] But it won't last; the road usually improves later. I think life is rather like a bumpy bed in a bad hotel. At first you can't imagine how you can lie on it, much less sleep on it. But presently one finds the right position and finally one is snoring away. By the time one is called it seems a v. good bed and one is loathe to leave it. (125)

Readers will also see a close-up portrait of Lewis' financial generosity as he helped to support Harwood in a new career venture, and it is plain that Lewis took his role as a godfather exceedingly seriously. Harwood has done an especially fine job in selecting letters that provide a rich mosaic of this personal side, along with Lewis' work as a scholar and his abilities as lay theologian and

fiction writer. This interplay energizes the volume and highlights Lewis' versatility.

A few minor distractions interrupt an otherwise enjoyable read: regrettably, Harwood mistranscribes one of Lewis' more well-known descriptions of Magdalen College, printed here as 'a cottage is something rather like a castle and also like a church' (100). The error might feel a bit more understandable if the facsimile of Lewis' letter, clearly reading *college*, weren't reproduced on the preceding page. In addition, though Harwood's narrative style is not precisely deficient, it can be uneven and repetitive.² Anxious to accentuate Lewis' godfatherly side, Harwood spends a good amount of time offering context about his father, Cecil, which is in some measure useful, but which also adds to a slightly meandering overall presentation. Photographs are credited at the end of the book; at first, the reader misses readily available captions, but photos are duly sourced in the appendix.

Laurence Harwood makes no pretence that his volume is anything beyond a scrapbook, a family testament to a beloved godfather and mentor. The reader of 'C. S. Lewis, My Godfather' will gain more insight into Lewis' personality than into the chronological details of his life; such insights are undoubtedly the book's greatest contribution to the canon of Lewis biographies. It would be an apt gift for the newcomer to Lewis, and an accessible portal through which the reader may pass into larger collections of Lewis' letters and essays.

Lydia Newell

Notes

1. Harwood avoids, for the most part, excessive attention to his own story, however. His recollections do not unduly replace information about Lewis nor do they stray into the more ponderous autobiographical reflections of Douglas Gresham's *Lenten Lands*.

2. Harwood also, at one or two short junctures, adopts a strangely defensive tone in describing his father Cecil's adherence to Rudolf Steiner's school of thought, 'anthroposophy'. Undoubtedly, anthroposophy played a defining role in the elder Harwood's career, as he was a teacher at one of London's first Steiner schools, and the philosophy perhaps requires some introduction to current readers. Yet Laurence Harwood seems to be reacting to unstated criticisms of anthroposophy, rather than explaining why it was a source of considerable discussion—and profound disagreement—between Lewis and Owen Barfield, as well as Cecil Harwood.