

**Walter Hooper (ed.), C.S. Lewis. *Collected Letters Vol. 3,*  
Review by Michael Ward  
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C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge and Joy 1950-1963*, Walter Hooper (ed.), xx + 1810 pp., Harper Collins, London, 2006. Review by Michael Ward.

Three years ago, when I reviewed the first two volumes of Lewis' collected letters for the American journal *Books & Culture*, I finished with the word, 'Encore!' My wish is now granted. Walter Hooper has returned to the stage with this third and final volume of Lewisian correspondence, covering 1950-1963, and his *magnum opus* is complete.

Editing a lifetime's letters is no easy undertaking: it is almost a lifetime's work in itself. First, the collecting of the letters is an Herculean labour. In the forty-four years since Hooper served briefly as Lewis' secretary, he has steadily accumulated from all corners of the globe the material which makes up these volumes, namely 3228 separate items of correspondence. Completists will be relieved to know that those letters which did not find their way into the earlier volumes, either for reasons of space or because they had not come to Hooper's attention, have now been included in a supplement to this third book. It is particularly pleasing to see the 'Great War' letters to Owen Barfield in print for the first time; more pleasing still is the fact that their dense philosophizing should be leavened by the inclusion of the many amusing illustrations which Lewis provided to clarify his arguments. The supplement even carries a few letters written during the period covered by this third volume; they came to light only after the main body of the book had been typeset. Hooper notes in his Preface that 'the occasional letter will be popping up for the next 100 years', a useful reminder that this aspect of the editorial task is akin to catching autumnal leaves in a wood, a game which requires first dizzying energy, then inexhaustible patience. No one could play that game perfectly, but Hooper has come darn close.

After the collecting comes the deciphering. Having studied for my own doctoral research many of the originals of Lewis' letters in the Bodleian Library, I know that his hand, especially in later years when he began to suffer from rheumatism, was not always easily legible; he frequently apologises to recipients for writing unclearly. The effects of wear-and-tear in the mail and the fading and dirtying which some letters have suffered over the decades mean that Hooper has had to exercise considerable analytical skill in determining what Lewis' hieroglyphics actually

denote. The beautifully crisp presentation of the correspondence in this volume is the result of hours spent puzzling over smudges.

But even after the text has been established, the end of the editorial road is still a long way off, because it is not enough simply to print the letters without explanatory comments. Given that usually we have only Lewis' half of his various correspondences (he almost never retained letters sent to him), it is sometimes difficult to understand what he is talking about. This is where Hooper shows his real mettle. He was once compared by Lewis' brother to a ferret - a harsh remark, but one with just a grain of truth inside its harshness, for Hooper demonstrates a voraciousness and fixity of purpose in hunting down explanations which is definitely not unferret-like. Tirelessly he has sought to discover the actual people behind the names of the salutes, many of whom were strangers even to Lewis (such as a certain Father George Restropo SJ, a seminarian in Maryland, to whom Lewis wrote a single letter, but whom Hooper has managed to locate) and many of whom have long since died. Tracking down these people or their descendants has enabled Hooper in large part to reconstruct both sides of the conversation and therefore to illuminate remarks by Lewis that would otherwise have remained mysterious or misleading.

In addition to the 'P.I.' side of this hermeneutic endeavour, there is the straightforwardly academic side: giving the sources of the quotations with which Lewis liberally sprinkled his sentences; identifying the (sometimes extremely obscure) allusions to Euripides or Mrs Humphrey Ward or the Second Book of Kings or what you will; translating the frequent phrases in Latin, Greek, French or Italian. And so on and so forth. The amount of help that Hooper gives to the reader on every page is deeply impressive.

I emphasize the editor's role here for two reasons. First, because it is more evident in this collection than in the first two volumes, which cover the years when Lewis was less famous and writing to a smaller circle of people. There were 775 letters in Volume II and only 457 letters in Volume I, whereas Volume III contains almost exactly 2000; inevitably then, Hooper's function as epistolary circus-master becomes much more important and necessary. He has to give due weight to 'big name' interlocutors (such as J.B. Priestley, Mervyn Peake, or Austin Farrer) without overlooking the numerous minor figures who have no other literary memorial.

It ought to be admitted at this point that quality has not kept pace with quantity; the letters here feel typically less rich and rewarding than those in the first two volumes. However, although there are fewer individual 'plums', there is a greater sense of the man in the round. We see Lewis negotiating with publishers, correcting proofs, exchanging ideas with colleagues, advising other writers. (The most

interesting letter, to my mind, is the lengthy critique he gives of the manuscript of Barfield's *Saving the Appearances* - a model of forceful, detailed, but inoffensive counsel.) That is the 'professional' Lewis. Then there is the 'pastoral' Lewis, the saintly sage giving encouragement and insight to struggling fellow Christians, amongst whom were more than his fair share of lame ducks and hypochondriacs. It is poignant to see how *this* Lewis becomes mellower and more reflective as the years go by. There is also the 'personal' Lewis, both commonplace and intimate: sending out that tedious thing, the round-robin change-of-address note after his move to Cambridge, but also telling his young Narnia readers how he likes to wallow in his bath with only his nostrils sticking out, and lamenting to his new wife that his tonsils and glands are sore and that he wants to be fussed over. As we switch back and forth between these different Lewises, the busy professor, the conscientious 'hot-gospeller', the anxious paterfamilias - in addition to the belletrist known to us from the earlier volumes - Hooper's dexterity in meshing the gears shows its worth.

But there is a second reason for emphasizing his role, and that relates to his treatment of one Kathryn Lindskoog, a Californian to whom Lewis wrote letters on seven occasions during these years. Readers of *The Chronicle* are probably aware that the late Mrs Lindskoog, having employed Hooper to write a preface for her first book on Lewis back in the 1970's, then turned against him (for reasons which may one day become public knowledge) and started a long, noisy campaign of vilification. She accused him of forging Lewis manuscripts (most notably *The Dark Tower*) and of committing various other remarkable misdemeanours, such as speaking with an English accent despite being American. Yes, seriously. Needless to say, her allegations are fantastic and Hooper has always declined to dignify the charges with any kind of written public response. Here, however, he comes close to responding, but one needs to be attentive to notice it. In a footnote to page 891, he shows, as a simple matter of fact, that Lindskoog knew Lewis' works less well than she thought she did. In a sketch of her in the biographical appendix, he politely overlooks all the titles she published in her efforts to ruin him, but instead praises the 'wonderful fortitude' with which she bore her multiple sclerosis. And on page 1669 he points out (again, with devastating matter-of-factness) that Alastair Fowler, writing in *The Yale Review*, disclosed that he had seen the manuscript of *The Dark Tower* in Lewis' company before Hooper had met either Lewis or Fowler.

In addition to containing Lewis' letters to Lindskoog, this volume has Lewis' nine letters to Hooper himself. These reveal that Hooper and Lewis became genuinely close in the short time they knew each other and that (contrary to Lindskoog's claims) Lewis did intend Hooper to become his permanent and paid secretary. In 1963, about a month before he died, Lewis wrote: 'Now about money. It's not so

much that I can do nothing as that I am ashamed to offer to a scholar and a gentleman what a servant wd. reject as an insult. I could go (forgive me-I can hardly bear to write it down) to £5 a week.'

Although Lewis was a bad judge of his financial situation, he was good judge of character. The expertise with which Hooper has edited these three superb volumes shows that he is indeed a scholar. The graciousness with which he handles the memory of his would-be nemesis confirms- if anyone had been in doubt- that he is also a gentleman.

Michael Ward

### **Notes**

1 A version of this article appeared in the March/April 2007 issue of *Books & Culture: A Christian Review*