C.S. Lewis: A Life, Alister McGrath (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2013) (read winter 2018-19)

An engrossing, thorough biography of an author revered by many Christians, especially for his many apologetic works (like *Mere Christianity*) and novels (*The Chronicles of Narnia*). Although this biographer is appreciative of Lewis's contributions, he also looks at less savory aspects of his life. In other words, this is a "warts and all" biography, not a hagiography.

For example, although the evidence for it is not unambiguous, Lewis had, at least at one point, sadomasochistic desires (pp. 61-62), and later apparently had an affair with his best friend's mother (pp. 73-76). He was tolerant of homosexuality but was not himself homosexual. Nor was he, at this time, a Christian. He identified himself as an atheist.

Although accepted as a student at Oxford, the "Great War" of 2014-2018 interfered before he could actually embark on his studies. He tried, as many other young men of his generation did, to avoid going to fight in the trenches in France, but ultimately that's where he wound up. Many of his comrades were killed, but he was only wounded and survived. However, Lewis did not write much about the horrors of war, even though he clearly experienced them. According to this biographer, Lewis had "contempt for a God he did not believe to exist, yet wished to blame for the carnage and destruction that lay around him." (p. 64)

It seems clear that the pre-Christian Lewis was an inveterate liar. In fact, he described himself as a "habitual liar" in a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves. (p. 86) What he lied about mostly was his relationship with Mrs. Moore, the mother of his friend who was killed in France. At first other students thought he lived with his mother, not knowing that she had died when Lewis was a boy. Then he led them to believe that she was his landlady, and he directly lied to his father about her, which troubled him and ruptured their fragile relationship, but his father did not cut off his Lewis's allowance (even though his father realized that it was going to support Mrs. Moore too).

But Lewis's relationship with her was more complex. His biographer says that

> Mrs. Moore was there for him when Lewis needed the emotional support and comfort which no other member of his family seemed able or willing to provide – at the time of his departure to war in France (his father's absence being especially hurtful to Lewis), during his convalescence from his war wounds, and as he sought to secure an academic position at Oxford. It is arguable that Mrs. Moore created an environment of relative structure and stability for him on his return from combat, easing his transition into academic life. (p. 95)

Lewis had a very difficult and nerve-wracking time finding an academic position after his Oxford studies, despite his outstanding academic record. Finally, he was awarded an "official Fellowship" as "Tutor in English" at Magdalen College, Oxford, in May, 1925. (p. 111). This began his career as an Oxford don.

Although he apparently avoided excessive drinking, Lewis "kept a barrel of beer in his rooms to entertain colleagues and students." (p. 116) During his time at Magdalen College Lewis's father, Albert Lewis, died. In a letter, C.S. Lewis described his father as "one for whom I have little affection and

whose society has for many years given me much discomfort and no pleasure." (p. 120) But his father had supported him financially for "six long years," and after he died Lewis, apparently for the rest of his life, felt both pain and guilt at his treatment of his father. (pp. 120-121)

In 1926, Lewis became acquainted with J.R.R. Tolkien, and their friendship – although it cooled in later life – resulted in Lewis becoming "the chief midwife to one of the great works of twentieth-century literature – Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. (pp. 130, 197-200)

McGrath devotes a whole chapter to "the slow conversion of Lewis from his early atheism, initially to a firm intellectual belief in God ... and finally to an explicit and informed commitment to Christianity." (p. 131) McGrath says that "Lewis's love of literature is not a backdrop to his conversion; it is integral to his discovery of the rational and imaginative appeal of Christianity." (p. 133) Ultimately Lewis was converted not by "hearing the Word" (or the Gospel story), but by a gradual overwhelming sense that reality itself was revealed in Christianity. In his autobiographical account of his conversion, Lewis wrote:

> On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow "rationalism." Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless. (p.137, quoting from *Surprised by Joy*)

But it was not the result of Lewis searching for God. McGrath says that the "process of crystallisation around belief in God appears to have taken place over an extended period of time, culminating in a dramatic moment of decision. ... This was not something he sought, but something that seemed to seek him." (p. 137) Lewis had compartmentalized his "troubling and disturbing thoughts about God, much as he had done with the horrors of the Great War, which disillusioned so many. But this "treaty with reality" (by which he shoved unwanted thoughts to a separate compartment of his mind) "broke free, and overwhelmed its former captor." (p. 139)

While this sounds overly dramatic, Lewis himself wrote that when he finally "gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed," he was perhaps "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." (p.139, quoting from *Surprised by Joy*) Lewis was not yet a Christian; that is, he did not connect his belief in God with the Gospel account of Jesus taking upon Himself the sins of the world. But it marked a change in his habits. He began attending chapel at Magdallen College, which was "the subject of much discussion and intrigue among other Magdalen dons in the early 1930s." (p. 139)

J.R.R. Tolkien was the main influence on Lewis becoming a Christian, helping him to see that Christianity was a "true myth," true in the sense that "*it really happened*." (p. 149, emphasis in original) This answered a question that had troubled Lewis since his teenage years: how could Christianity alone be true, and everything else false?

> Lewis now realized that he did not have to declare that the great myths of the pagan age were *totally* false; they were echoes or anticipations of the full truth, which was made known only in and through the Christian faith. Christianity brings to fulfilment and completion imperfect and partial insights about reality, scattered abroad in human culture. (p. 150, emphasis in

original)

It seems to me that this insight might apply not only to the "great myths of the pagan age," but also to other contemporary religions, such as Islam and Buddhism.

Lewis never learned to drive, or to type. Partly his refusal to type was because he had only one joint in his thumbs, which made it difficult to type properly, but he also objected to using a typewriter on principle. He believed that the "incessant clacking of the typewriter keys dulled the writer's appreciation of the rhythms and cadences of the English language." (p. 163)

When engaged with "tutorials" with students, Lewis was described by one as a "red-faced bald man, dressed in baggy jacket and trousers, who would sit smoking in his shabbily comfortable armchair, doodling and occasionally taking notes, while the student would read his essay for about twenty minutes." (p. 164) He was also described as "shabby," "untidy," or "unkempt," and a "heavy smoker." (p. 165) He was an incredible reader, reading and re-reading books in his personal library and memorizing many passages. But he neglected other kinds of reading, such as the daily newspapers, so that even his friends found him "worryingly ignorant of current affairs." (p. 166)

His main claim to fame at Oxford was as a lecturer. (He was not a professor, but a "tutorial fellow in English.") He used only skimpy notes, and spoke so clearly and fluently that he drew to his lectures "crowds that others could only dream of attracting." (p. 167) His friend, J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, did not read particularly well, and his lectures were poorly attended. (p. 179)

One idea of Lewis's (that I have thought about before reading this biography) is what he called "chronological snobbery." (pp. 184, 187) As his biographer put it,

> Reading texts from the past makes it clear that what we now term "the past" was once "the present," which proudly yet falsely regarded itself as having found the right intellectual answers or moral values that had eluded its predecessors. As Lewis later puts it, "All that is not eternal is eternally out of date." (p. 168, quoting from Lewis's *The Four Loves*)

Later McGrath discusses this point further, including this quotation from Lewis:

> We need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. (p. 188)

Lewis's first popular book to acquire a large audience was *The Problem of Pain*, which McGrath says contains "overstatements, simplifications, and omissions," yet many of its readers found in it "a voice that was sympathetic to their concerns, and reassuring in its responses." He says it also proved to be a critical link in the chain that soon led to the emergence of Lewis's popular fame. (p. 204)

His popularity burgeoned during World War II, when Lewis, who escaped the military draft by two

months, accepted an invitation to give a series of talks on religion over the nation-wide British Broadcasting Network. These talks proved enormously successful, and paved the way for his subsequent popular books, such as *Mere Christianity*. McGrath says that Lewis presented "a consensual, nonclerical, transdenominational vision of the Christian faith," which was "rather individualist, even solitary," containing little about "the church, the community of faith, or Christianity in relation to society." (p. 211)

Lewis thought denominations are important, because becoming or being a Christian requires commitment to a *specific form* of Christianity, but before getting to that specific form there is a "notional, transdenominational form of Christianity" that underlies all such forms. He used this analogy:

> [Mere Christianity] is like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. (p. 220)

Lewis's argument in *Mere Christianity* is examined in detail by McGrath (p. 222 et seq.), who emphasizes that it is a popular, not an academic book, and points out that it has obvious weaknesses. For example, Lewis's argument that there are only three possible ways of making sense of Jesus of Nazareth, as a lunatic, a diabolical figure, or the Son of God, fails to recognize other obvious possibilities, such as that "Jesus was a well-loved religious leader and martyr whose followers later came to see him as divine." (p. 227) McGrath also notes that Lewis's code of social and personal ethics, particularly his assumptions about women, are "deeply embedded in the bedrock of a social order that has long since disappeared," and make Lewis seem very dated to secular readers today in the light of the massive changes in social attitudes following the upheavals of the 1960s.

Although books such as *The Problem of Pain* and *Mere Christianity* tended to employ "evidence-based reasoning," he came to see that *imagination* could also be important in pointing people toward the Christian faith. His "Space Trilogy," which McGrath says is more accurately designated the "Ransom Trilogy," used fantasy to counter the belief in "scientism" as a world view. (p. 233 et seq.) In particular, Lewis challenged the enormously popular form of social Darwinism (follow by, among others, Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells) that advocated eugenics, the compulsory sterilization of the mentally deficient. Lewis also opposed vivisection, the advancement of science by often very painful experiments on living animals. (See also p. 275) While Lewis's views on these subjects are widely accepted today, after the horrors of Nazi Germany, the important point (for me, anyway) is that Lewis grounded them in his theology and he expressed them when other educated people, including many of his friends at Oxford, strongly rejected them.

Lewis was famous by the end of World War II, yet his fame did not bring him happiness nor, especially, tranquility. He was inundated with requests, especially in letters (which his brother, Warnie, mostly answered), and his growing popularity with lay Christians cost him the support of his academic colleagues and many professional theologians. Furthermore, his "family" was disintegrating. Mrs. Moore, his surrogate mother, became increasingly irritable and confused and finally slipped into dementia and had to be put into a nursing home ... at Lewis's expense. Warnie became a severe alcoholic. And even some of his friends, like Tolkien, became more distant.

One argument of Lewis's that makes sense to me is his critique of naturalism. In his book *Miracles*, he pointed out that if naturalism is the result of rational reflection, then the validity of that process of thought has to be assumed in order to reach that conclusion. While McGrath, and others, have critiqued his explanation, Lewis expressed it this way, "If thought is the undesigned and irrelevant product of cerebral motions, what reason have we to trust it?" (p. 252) McGrath comments:

> In response to those who asserted that Christian beliefs – such as belief in God – are simply the result of environmental factors or evolutionary pressures, Lewis insisted that such approaches ended up invalidating the thought processes on which they ultimately depended. Those who represent all human thought as an accident of the environment are simply subverting all their own thoughts – including the belief that thought is determined by environment. (p. 252)

However, Lewis agreed that the arguments he used in reaching his correct conclusion about naturalism were weak, and he re-wrote a chapter in *Miracles* to expand and clarify his arguments. (p. 254) This challenge to his critique about naturalism seems to have marked a turning point in Lewis's approach to Christianity. Thereafter, instead of specifically dealing with apologetic themes, in terms of the explicit rational defense of the Christian faith, Lewis began to focus more on the use of human imagination, as in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, which McGrath says represent "the imaginative outworking of the core philosophical and theological ideas Lewis had been developing since the mid-1930s, expressed in a narrative rather than a rational manner." (p. 260)

The seven books in the *Chronicles of Narnia* were not published in the order in which they were written, and the order of writing does not accurately reflect the chronology in the *Chronicles*. Although contrary arguments can be made, McGrath suggests that the best order is this: (1) *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, (2) *Prince Caspian*, (3) *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader*," (4) *The Silver Chair*, (5) *The Horse and His Boy*, (6) *The Magician's Nephew*, and (7) *The Last Battle*. (pp. 272-274)

McGrath points out that Lewis made a clear distinction between "imaginative" and "imaginary."

> The "imaginary" is something that has been falsely imagined, having no counterpart in reality. Lewis regards such an invented reality as opening the way to delusion. The "imaginative" is something produced by the human mind as it tries to respond to something greater than itself, struggling to find images adequate to the reality. The more imaginative a mythology, the greater its ability to "communicate more Reality to us." (p. 263, quoting from a letter by Lewis)

In the second of McGrath's two chapters on the *Chronicles of Narnia*, entitled "Narnia, Exploring an Imaginative World," he makes some very interesting points that I'm sure I never thought about when reading the series. He says that there are two ways of reading the books, which he compares to exploring a house. We can wander through the rooms, noticing what's in them and how they are connected. Or we can stop to gaze out the windows in each room, to "see farther than before, as the landscape opens up in front of us," which lets us see "not just an accumulation of individual facts, but the bigger picture which underlies them" (p. 285)

This metaphor does not seem particularly helpful to me, but his comments about Aslan do make sense in echoing the theme "of the longing of the human heart for God." McGrath says, "Using Aslan as God's proxy, Lewis constructs a narrative of yearning and wistfulness, tinged with the hope of ultimate fulfilment." (pp. 290-91) He points to a number of similar Christ figures in literature and film, such as Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings*. (p. 291)

McGrath also explains that Lewis, who was not a professional theologian, did not set forth a specific theory of redemption, but rather portrayed the fact of it by describing the death and resurrection of Aslan, which has many parallels to the New Testament account of Christ's death and resurrection. For example, "Aslan is put to death, surrounded by a baying mob, who mock him in his final agony;" Lucy and Susan are the only witnesses to Aslan's coming back to life (paralleling the New Testament's teaching that the first witnesses to Christ's resurrection were three women); and Aslan breathes upon the petrified Narnians who had been turned to stone by the White Witch, restoring them to life. (pp. 294-295)

Finally, in this chapter McGrath notes some criticisms of the *Chronicles*, especially of Lewis's (apparent) failure to be more gender inclusive. However, he points out that, "Despite the social predominance of male role models in his cultural context, the gender roles in the *Chronicles of Narnia* tend to be evenly balanced. Indeed, if there is a lead human character in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, this is played by a female. Lucy is the protagonist ...." (p. 305)

After the war, Lewis became increasingly unappreciated and unhappy at Oxford. He was passed over for senior appointments on at least three occasions. Proposed changes to the undergraduate curriculum in English were opposed by Lewis. And he was overworked. The postwar surge of students at Oxford resulted in an unbearable increase in his tutorial responsibilities and a corresponding decrease in the time he could spend in academic research and writing.

Suddenly a way out opened up. Oxford's great academic rival, the University of Cambridge, was creating a new professorship in medieval and Renaissance English. C.S. Lewis was the first scholar proposed for this position. Although he inexplicably turned it down, twice, he was ultimately persuaded that this was right for him and he accepted. A vast crowd turned out to hear his first lecture at Cambridge, so he was off to a good start.

The lecture was based on Lewis's bold statement that "The Renaissance never happened." What he meant by that was that there was not a "drab and degenerate period between the glories of classical culture and their rebirth and renewal during the Renaissance." Rather, the literature of the Middle Ages deserved to be treated with sympathy and respect, not summarily dismissed by Renaissance humanism. (p. 316) In other words, there were not sharp breaks between the end of classical (Greek and Roman) culture and the flowering of the arts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The focus of Lewis's writing changed after he moved to Cambridge. No longer did he write apologetic works offering a rational defense of the Christian faith to unbelievers. Now he tended to explore the imaginative and relational dimensions of faith with a presumed Christian audience in mind. This period produced such books as *Till We Have Faces* (1956), *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958), *The Four Loves* (1960), and others.

The life of this unusual Christian intellectual leader was abruptly upended by a strange development. Lewis, apparently a life-long bachelor who had not shown much interest in women (other than the motherly Mrs. Moore), in a short space of time met and married an American divorcée, Helen Joy Davidman Gresham, who was 16 years younger than he. Since she was divorced, they could not be married in the Church of England, so they were married in a furtive civil ceremony, to which none of Lewis's closest friends were invited.

The reason for this strange turn of events were many. They included Lewis's popularity with literary-minded women (he met and corresponded with many); Joy Gresham's pursuit of Lewis (her son said she went to England in order to seduce him); the intellectual stimulation and encouragement she provided, which spurred some of his later books; Lewis's kindness and generosity toward one who was financially needy, unlikely to find work in America because of her former Communist associations, and only able to stay in England if she married a citizen; and Lewis's naivete in ignoring the legal consequences of marriage, including the rights Joy Gresham now had as his wife. (See, generally, p. 320 et seq.)

While it seems pretty obvious that Joy took advantage of Lewis, it turned out to have some clear benefits for him. She was an intelligent and perceptive literary scholar, and helped Lewis regain his waning enthusiasm for writing. Moreover, Lewis did fall in love with her, although it did not happen until she was diagnosed with incurable cancer. Also, although it involved breaking church rules, Lewis persuaded a young cleric of the Church of England to marry them, which he did in a bedside ceremony witnessed by Lewis's brother Warnie and the ward sister. (p. 337)

Although Joy lived several years after that, she died at the age of 45, leaving behind a grieving husband. How deeply Lewis felt his loss is revealed in a remarkable book he wrote about it, *A Grief Observed*. McGrath says this book is "an uncensored and unrestrained account" of Lewis's doubts and spiritual agony at her death. (p. 342) Lewis did not want to cause his friends any embarrassment, so he tried to disguise his writing and to conceal is authorship, although it was eventually revealed.

While *A Grief Observed* is acclaimed as an authentic and moving account of the impact of bereavement, McGrath suggests that it is also significant "in exposing the vulnerability and fragility of a purely rational faith." (p. 345) Thus it seems much more realistic than Lewis's earlier work, *The Problem of Pain*, which tends to treat suffering as something that can be approached objectively and dispassionately. It also seems more consistent with the development in Lewis's thinking from Christianity as a faith to be grasped (and defended) rationally to a fuller understanding of the imagination's role in validating the faith.

After Joy died, Lewis himself began to experience serious health problem. His final years were not especially happy ones. His brother, Warnie, became so wiped out with alcoholism that he didn't even attend Lewis's funeral. One of his step-sons, Joy's son David, decided to become an observant Jew, and Lewis had to meet his dietary requirements and arrange for him to attend London Talmudical College. Finally his kidneys began to fail, and as dialysis was not then in general use, his days were numbered. He died on November 22, 1963, the same day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated (which, of course, all but precluded media attention to Lewis's death).

In an interesting final chapter on "The Lewis Phenomenon," McGrath shows how through his books C.S. Lewis rose in popularity through the 1950s, then declined during the turbulent sixties, and started on an upward trend in the seventies, a trend that has not yet abated.

Evangelicals, at least during the early years, did not embrace him, because "he violated both their social norms and their religious concerns." After all, "What evangelical would want to be associated with someone who smoked heavily, drank copious quantities of beer, and held views on the Bible, the Atonement, and purgatory which were out of place in the evangelical community of that age?" (p. 365)

As McGrath explains:

> Theologically, evangelicals had little in common with Lewis, who offered a literary explanation of the observed centrality of the Bible to the Christian faith, not a theological defence of its right to occupy that place. [With one exception] Lewis did not associate with British evangelicals, even in Oxford or Cambridge. In the year of Lewis's death, Martyn Lloyd Jones (1899-1981), one of the most influential British evangelical preachers of that time, pronounced him to be unsound on a number of issues, chiefly relating to the doctrine of salvation. (p. 365)

But that negative view on the part of evangelicals gradually was reversed. Lewis was endorsed by such prominent evangelicals as Billy Graham and Carl F. H. Henry, and student Christian organizations, such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, began to make Lewis's works "part of their staple diet." (p. 373)

This a wonderfully well-written biography of a flawed, brilliant Christian writer. I thoroughly enjoyed it.