ALISTER E. McGRATH

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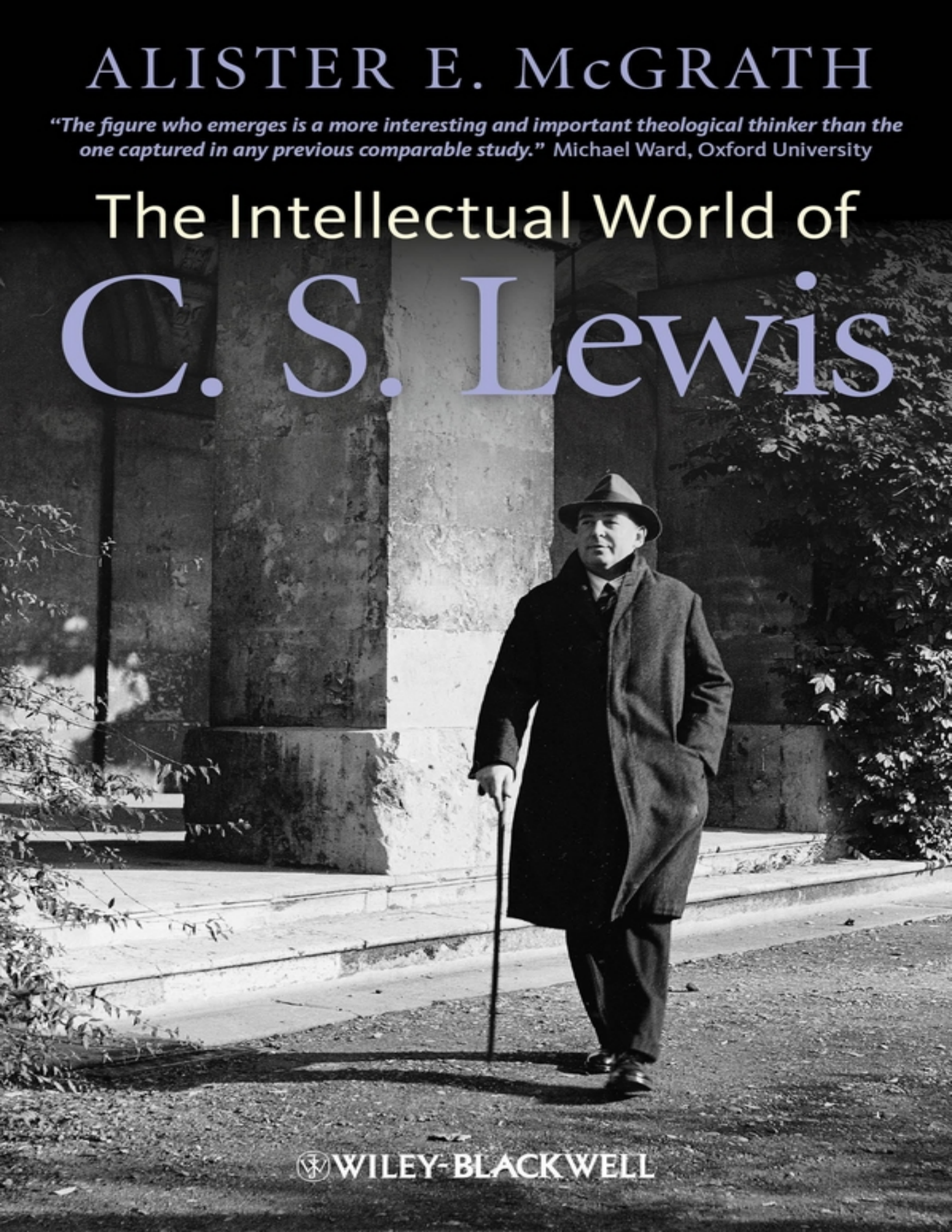
The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis



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Praise for *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*

“Thoughtful and thought-provoking, these essays expertly help to situate the intellectual world of C. S. Lewis in its broader context. McGrath knows Lewis’s corpus in detail and casts a friendly though not unquestioning eye over areas of his work which have hitherto received surprisingly little attention. He connects Lewis to currents and schools of thought that have a refreshing and enlarging effect upon our understanding of the man. The figure who emerges from this examination is a more interesting and important theological thinker than the one captured in any previous comparable study.” ***Michael Ward, Oxford University***

“Alister McGrath’s *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* is a very welcome addition to the growing number of scholarly studies of Lewis. Well-researched and written, this book offers fresh insights into several areas of Lewis’s literary corpus, including his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, his intellectual development as an Oxford student, and his ideas on myth and metaphor. McGrath also offers penetrating discussions of Lewis’s argument from desire, the role of reason and imagination in his apologetics, his religious identity as an Anglican, and his status as a ‘theologian.’ I highly recommend *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* as well as McGrath’s biography of Lewis, *C. S. Lewis: A Life.*” ***Don King, Montreat College***

“In the mass of recent writing about C. S. Lewis, this volume stands out as essential, and should be on everyone’s reading list, whether that of the research scholar or general reader. The author has the same feeling for the ‘great tradition’ of western literature and theology as Lewis himself did, and has similar skills in exploring it, so that Lewis is for the first time properly set in his intellectual context. It is appropriate to deploy the metaphors of light and vision that the author detects in Lewis, to affirm that this is a series of brilliant essays, brightly illuminating the intellectual

resources on which Lewis draws, enabling us better to see the ‘big picture’ which connects myth, metaphor, memory, realism, religious desire, the Anglican mind, and the dynamics of academic power. In reviewing these themes, this exceptional study combines reason and imagination as Lewis did himself. Like Lewis’s own work, it is both deeply learned and accessible to a wide range of readers.” ***Paul Fiddes, Professor of Systematic Theology at Oxford University***

“This important new study of Lewis sets the man and his ideas in the intellectual world of his day, and so helps us to appreciate all the more fully his distinctive contribution as a scholar, an artist, and an apologist. Through a series of finely researched and characteristically well-written essays, Alister McGrath both reveals the extent to which Lewis was a product of his own age, and reminds us why he remains every bit as relevant for ours. A penetrating engagement with one of the most important Christian voices of the twentieth century.” ***Trevor Hart, University of St Andrews***

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The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis

Alister E. McGrath

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A Brief Biography of C. S. Lewis

Many reading this work will need no introduction to Lewis. Others, however, might appreciate a sketch of his intellectual and spiritual development, to help set his ideas in their proper context.[1]

Clive Staples Lewis was born in the Irish city of Belfast on November 29, 1898, entering into a turbulent political world increasingly shaped by the growing influence of Irish nationalism, and demands for “Home Rule.” Lewis was the second son of Albert and Flora Lewis, who were pillars of the Protestant establishment of the day. After learning his trade in the Irish capital city, Dublin, Albert Lewis had established a successful solicitor’s practice in Belfast’s prestigious Royal Avenue. Flora came from the heart of the now-fading “Protestant Ascendancy.” Her grandfather had been a bishop, and her father a clergyman, of the Church of Ireland.

A close relationship developed between Clive and his elder brother, Warren. At an early stage, for reasons that remain unclear, Lewis insisted on being called “Jack.” In 1905, the family moved to Leeborough (or “Little Lea”), a large, newly built house in the Strandtown area of Belfast. Lewis’s earliest memories of this house involved the presence of substantial quantities of books, scattered throughout the vast house. Both his father and mother read widely, and Lewis was free to roam and read as he pleased. When his brother Warren (usually referred to as “Warnie”) left home to go to school in England, Lewis found solace in reading, developing a vivid sense of imagination and longing.

Lewis’s mother died of cancer in August 1908, ending the security of his childhood. “It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.”[2] Unwisely, Albert Lewis decided to send his younger son away from home, to

be educated at boarding schools in England. As Lewis's autobiographical narrative in *Surprised by Joy* makes clear, he found life at these schools – Wyvern School, Watford; Cherbourg School, Malvern; and Malvern College – somewhat difficult. In the end Albert Lewis decided that his only option was to have his son privately tutored. Lewis was sent to study with William Kirkpatrick, Albert Lewis's former headmaster, now retired to the southern English county of Surrey.

It was the right move, and Lewis flourished in this new environment. In effect, Kirkpatrick introduced Lewis to the Oxford tutorial model, forcing him to develop and defend his views. Lewis's experience with Kirkpatrick was educationally and spiritually formative. Thanks to Kirkpatrick's astute mentoring, Lewis won a scholarship to University College, Oxford, to study classics in December 1916. By this time, Lewis had become a trenchant, even strident, atheist. Lewis's letters of this period make it clear that this was not an adolescent reaction against the faith of his parents, but a considered rejection of belief in God based on arguments that he believed to be unanswerable.

By now, the First World War was in its third year, and Lewis realized that he faced a threat of conscription. Lewis took the decision to volunteer to enlist. He went up to Oxford in April 1917, combining a somewhat desultory study of the classics with military training – initially, in the Oxford University Officers' Training Corps, and then in an Officer Training Unit based at Keble College. In November 1917, Lewis was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Somerset Light Infantry, and deployed to the front line near Arras, in northern France.

His wartime experiences reinforced his atheism. His poetry of the period rails against silent, uncaring heaven. Lewis's "Ode for New Year's Day," written when under fire in January 1918, proclaimed the final rejection of a God who was in any

case an unpersuasive human invention. Several months later, Lewis received a shrapnel wound during a British assault on the village of Riez du Vinage, and was sent home to England to recover. He was demobilized in December 1918, and resumed his studies at University College, Oxford, in January 1919. It was at this point that Lewis can be said to have really begun his academic studies at Oxford.

Lewis proved to be an outstanding student. Kirkpatrick's mentoring ensured he could hold his own in tutorials, and had given him a deep grasp of both Latin and Greek, allowing him to study the history, literature, and philosophy of the ancient world from the original texts. He was awarded first-class honors in classical moderations in 1920, and first-class honors in *Literae Humaniores* in 1922. On realizing that he needed to widen his academic competency in order to secure a teaching position, he gained first-class honors in English language and literature in 1923, cramming two years of studies into a single year. At this time, Lewis's outlook was shaped by intellectual currents prevalent at Oxford, which he adapted into his own "New Look."

Lewis was appointed to a temporary lectureship in philosophy at University College for the academic year 1923–4, before being appointed to a tutorial fellowship in English language and literature at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1925. Lewis became a member of the Oxford University Faculty of English Language and Literature, where he developed a growing friendship with J. R. R. Tolkien, playing a key role in encouraging Tolkien to complete and publish the "romantic trilogy" now known as *The Lord of the Rings*.[3]

Although Lewis was still an atheist when he took up his fellowship at Magdalen College, he was clearly experiencing doubts about the intellectual coherence and spiritual adequacy of this position. There are signs that he was prepared to consent (though with considerable reluctance)

to the possible existence of some abstract notion of God by around 1920; nevertheless, his conversion to theism was characterized by a more developed belief that God was an active agent, not simply an explanatory principle. Although this transition is traditionally dated to the summer of 1929, I have argued that the evidence clearly indicates that this change of belief dates from the following year, 1930.[4]

This was followed by a further development, partly catalyzed by a 1931 conversation with Tolkien over the nature of myth, which led Lewis to embrace Christianity. While the timescale of this second phase of Lewis's conversion remains frustratingly unclear at points, his process of intellectual realignment was essentially complete by the summer of 1932, when he penned *The Pilgrim's Regress*, an allegorical account of his own journey to faith and its implications.

Lewis's conversion to Christianity – which he later described in *Surprised by Joy* (1955) – initially had little impact on his academic career. His *Allegory of Love* (1936) was well received, winning the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Prize in 1937. The publication of this work marked the beginning of his inexorable rise to academic fame, sealed with his magisterial *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954) and his election as a Fellow of the British Academy. Other academic landmarks along the way included the 1941 Ballard Matthews Lectures at University College, Bangor (published as *A Preface to Paradise Lost*); the 1943 Riddell Memorial Lectures (published as *The Abolition of Man*); and his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1948.

Yet Lewis's academic standing was damaged to no small extent by his decision to write popular works, dealing with issues relating to Christian apologetics. Lewis's first work of popular apologetics, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), probably did Lewis's academic reputation little harm. *The Screwtape*

Letters (1942), however, alarmed many of his Oxford colleagues. How could such a trivializing tale of satanic incompetence have been written by an Oxford don? It was probably the immense popular success of this work, as much as its populist tone, that irritated many of his colleagues. A question mark now hung over Lewis's academic credentials in Oxford, leading to him being passed over for at least two significant preferments during the late 1940s.

Yet many admired Lewis's more accessible writings, and encouraged him to write more. Lewis was not so much a popularizer as a *translator* of theology – an apologist who was able to give a good account of the rationality of the Christian faith, and state its core themes in a language that was accessible outside academic circles. The British Broadcasting Corporation invited him to give a series of wartime talks in 1942 which proved so successful that they led to three further series of addresses. Lewis eventually published these, with some minor changes, in *Mere Christianity* (1952), now generally considered to be his most influential non-fiction work.

Lewis achieved celebrity status in the United Kingdom during the Second World War, and in the United States shortly afterwards. This fame might have faded away, had Lewis not developed a quite unexpected line of writing, which took most of his close friends and family by surprise. In October 1950, the first of the seven "Chronicles of Narnia" appeared. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* became a children's classic, showing Lewis's remarkable facility to engage the imagination, and use it as a gateway for theological exploration – most notably, in relation to the notion of incarnation. Aslan, the great and noble lion of Narnia, became one of the most firmly established literary characters of the twentieth century.

Yet by the time the final novel in the series – *The Last Battle* – was published in 1956, Lewis had moved on from Oxford University. Now a married man, Lewis had been elected as the first holder of the University of Cambridge's newly established Chair in Medieval and Renaissance English. After his move to Cambridge, Lewis wrote rarely in an explicitly apologetic mode, preferring to supplement his academic writings with more popular works exploring aspects of the Christian faith for the benefit of believers – such as *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958) and *The Four Loves* (1960). The death of Lewis's wife, Joy Davidman, from cancer in 1960 prompted Lewis to write, under a pseudonym, *A Grief Observed*, now often cited as one of the finest accounts of the grieving process.

By June 1963, it was clear that Lewis himself was very unwell. Long-standing problems with his prostate gland had become more serious, with renal complications developing which placed his heart under strain. Lewis accepted the inevitable, resigning from his Cambridge chair, and discussing his death openly with his correspondents. He died at his Oxford home in the early evening of November 22, 1963, shortly before President John F. Kennedy died from gunshot wounds in Dallas, Texas. Lewis is buried in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church, Headington Quarry, Oxford.

Notes

1 See further Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis – A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*. Carol Spring, IL: Tyndale House, 2013. British and Commonwealth edition: London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013. All references are to the American edition of this work.

2 *Surprised by Joy*, 22.

3 Lewis used this description of the work in his recently discovered nomination of Tolkien for the 1961 Nobel Prize in literature: see McGrath, C. S. Lewis – A Life, 351–2.

4 For analysis, see McGrath, C. S. Lewis – A Life, 131–51.

Introduction

By the time of his death in November 1963, C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) was widely recognized as one of the most significant and successful writers of the twentieth century. He had achieved a high profile both as a Christian apologist (particularly during the Second World War), and as a highly acclaimed writer of fiction. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1948, some years before the publication of the Narnia series of novels, regarded by most as his most influential and innovative novels.

Yet alongside his apologetic and fictional writings, Lewis had achieved international distinction in the field of English language and literature. He was appointed as Cambridge University's first Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English in 1954, and elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1955. This deep immersion in the western tradition underlies Lewis's creative synthesis of theological reflection and literary imagination, widely regarded as one of his most significant achievements.

Following Lewis's death in 1963, his popularity and influence declined, partly reflecting the rapid changes in western culture during the 1960s, which relegated many of Lewis's approaches and attitudes to the margins of culture. Many believed that religion was declining in the face of a rising tide of secularism, especially in the United States. The rise of "logical positivism" at Oxford and elsewhere threatened to make any discussion of God meaningless, as the seemingly irresistible intellectual virtues of radical empiricism captured hearts, minds, and faculties of philosophy. Lewis himself had taken the view that his writings would fade into obscurity within five years of his

death, and had no expectations of remaining a long-term presence on the literary or religious scene.

Yet by 1980, Lewis had bounced back. Logical positivism failed to deliver its promised intellectual virtues. Questions of meaning resurfaced as important in western culture. Religion, dismissed as an outmoded irrelevance by the angry young prophets of the 1960s, began to become an increasingly significant force in private piety and public life in the United States. Lewis enjoyed a resurgence. For many, his renewed appeal lay in his imaginatively winsome "Chronicles of Narnia," especially *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, now regularly cited as one of the best children's books of the twentieth century.

Others locate the reason for this resurgence in Lewis's religious appeal, his emphasis on Christian basics, and his eschewing of denominational politics. Some suggest his new popularity reflects his remarkable ability to communicate orthodox theological ideas in culturally accessible forms. Others point out that his appeal to the imagination secured a new lease of life for religious ideas and values in a post-rationalist western culture. Yet whatever the explanations for this unexpected development might be, it is an inescapable fact that, more than a generation after his death, Lewis's works are now more popular and widely read than at any point during his lifetime.

Fifty years after Lewis's death, it is clearly appropriate to reflect further on his intellectual achievements and heritage. To mark this occasion, I wrote a substantial new biography of Lewis, expanding and correcting earlier accounts in the light of intensive archival work and the substantial secondary literature that has now accumulated concerning Lewis.[1] During the course of that rigorous research, it became clear that many aspects of Lewis's thought needed detailed and careful reconsideration, especially in the light of their intellectual context. A biography, however, is not

well adapted to the demands of such sustained intellectual engagement, which would inevitably disrupt its narrative flow.

While the substance of this research was woven into the biographical narrative, it seemed appropriate to publish an additional collection of academic essays, providing a full analysis of these questions, and document the grounds for reaching certain conclusions. This collection of essays opens up new questions for critical examination (such as the development of Lewis's "New Look" and his privileging of a "metaphoric of vision"), as well as revisiting some more familiar questions which merit further discussion (most notably, Lewis's "argument from desire," and his status as a theologian).

These eight substantial pieces of research, none of which have been published before, aim to set Lewis in the greater context of the western literary and theological tradition, exploring how he appropriated and modified its narratives, ideas, and images. Lewis himself was nourished by this great tradition,[2] which he described as "the clean sea breeze of the centuries,"[3] refreshing and reanimating our ideas and blowing away what is stale and ephemeral. Lewis's work is not embedded within a Christian sub-culture (though he has clearly found a substantial base of support here), but within the western intellectual tradition as a whole, which enriched and deepened his personal scholarly vision, as he in turn enriched and extended it.

These essays both position Lewis against an informing context, while at the same time encouraging Lewis scholarship to see itself in a deeper and broader intellectual perspective, from which it has much to learn, and to which it has much to contribute. Thus Lewis's discussion of the nature and significance of "myth" (55–81), and his extensive and creative use of metaphors based on sight (83–104) locate him within both classic and contemporary discussions

of these themes, most notably recent debates about the role of myth in contemporary culture, and the “hegemony of vision” in the western philosophical and literary tradition.

The collection of essays opens with a consideration of the difficulties and questions attending Lewis’s celebrated autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* (1955). This work is widely used as an historical source for Lewis’s early reflections on the notion of “Joy,” and his complex intellectual transition from atheism to Christianity. Yet it is clear that this work needs to be used with caution in this respect, partly because of issues attending the correlation of Lewis’s inner and outer worlds, partly because of Lewis’s difficulty in recalling dates, and perhaps most fundamentally because of Lewis’s covert agendas in writing the book in the first place.

The second essay deals with what Lewis styles his “New Look” – Lewis’s personal appropriation of the philosophical and cultural ideas and values that so influenced Oxford University in the early 1920s, and which helped shape Lewis’s outlook as an undergraduate in the aftermath of the Great War. The movement known as “Oxford Realism” has only just begun to receive its due attention from historians of philosophy; this recent research helps clarify Lewis’s shifting views on realism and idealism in the 1920s. Apart from illuminating some aspects of Lewis’s complex transition to theism, this analysis helps highlight the fact that many of the views that Lewis would later critique in his apologetic and literary works were those which he himself had held as a younger man.

The third essay focuses on Lewis’s changing understanding of the nature of “myth,” and especially its implications for his conversion from theism to Christianity. Lewis’s later works of fiction, particularly the “Chronicles of Narnia,” make extensive – though generally implicit – use of this literary form. The essay explores the discussions of “myth” which were prevalent at Oxford University in the

early twentieth century and notes how Lewis fits in to a wider academic and literary discussion of the nature of myth at this time. The implications of Lewis's approach for the celebrated "demythologization" controversy associated with Rudolf Bultmann during the 1940s and 1950s are considered. Lewis's contribution to this debate has not been properly recognized, and remains of importance for contemporary discussion.

The fourth essay considers one of the most distinctive features of Lewis's fictional and apologetic writings, which has been overlooked by Lewis scholarship – his extensive use of ocular imagery as a metaphor for truth and knowledge. Lewis's works make frequent reference to the images of illumination, light, sun, and shadows, all of which have a rich history of deployment within the western literary canon. This essay sets Lewis's imagery in its intellectual context, and examines how he develops it for his own purposes.

One of the most distinctive features of Lewis's apologetic writings is his restatement of the "argument from desire." Although Lewis clearly draws on earlier writers in developing this approach, he adapts it for his own ends, leading to a rich and complex way of exploring and affirming the rationality and existential appeal of the Christian faith. Previous analyses have tended to assimilate Lewis's approach to existing philosophical defenses of theism; the fifth essay in this work establishes the distinct logic of Lewis's own, more imaginative, approach, and sets it in the broader context of his apologetic method.

This naturally leads into the sixth essay, which examines Lewis's general approach to apologetics, looking at the historical emergence of Lewis's apologetic enterprise, considering in particular his formulation of an imaginative apologetics that transcended the limits of the rationalist approaches more characteristic of his time. Lewis is now

widely considered as a role model in popular Christian apologetics; this essay will be an important resource for those wishing to model their approach on Lewis.

The seventh essay considers Lewis's relationship with Anglicanism, the specific form of Christianity that he knew as a child in Belfast, and chose to adopt in Oxford after his reconversion to theism in 1930. Lewis regarded the Church of England as a localized embodiment and enactment of a deeper vision of Christianity, which he came to designate "mere Christianity." This essay reflects both on Lewis's views on the relation of "mere Christianity" to its specific denominational enactments, and more specifically on whether Lewis can be described as an "Anglican" in the confessional sense of the term.

Finally, the eighth essay explores the controversial question of whether Lewis can be regarded as a theologian. It moves beyond the traditional debate over this issue, which has tended to focus on how Lewis developed and handled religious ideas, and explores the more fundamentally sociological issues that underlie this debate – most notably, the role of intellectuals in creating and maintaining group identity, and the dynamics of power and exclusion within such groups. In defending the propriety of referring to Lewis as a theologian, the essay offers some unsettling reflections concerning the anxieties and agendas of those wishing to deny Lewis this status.

It is hoped that these more detailed engagements with aspects of Lewis's thought may help encourage a deeper exploration of his ideas and methods, especially by situating them within a broader historical narrative. Lewis was deeply conscious of standing within a tradition of literary, philosophical, and theological reflection, which he extended and deepened in his own distinctive manner. There is more that remains to be discovered about Lewis's rich intellectual vision, and even more that remains to be properly

understood. Half a century after his death, the process of receiving and interpreting Lewis has still only begun.

Alister E. McGrath
King's College London
September 2012

Notes

1 Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis – A Life*.

2 Lewis, of course, had a somewhat greater vision of this tradition than the rather sparse account set out in F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1948.

3 "On the Reading of Old Books"; Essay Collection, 440. Works by Lewis are referred to simply by their short titles; the editions used are detailed in the final section of this work, entitled "Works by Lewis Cited."

1

The Enigma of Autobiography: Critical Reflections on *Surprised by Joy*

In 1955, Lewis published *Surprised by Joy*, subtitled "The Shape of My Early Life." It is one of Lewis's most cited works, and contains some of his finest prose and most intimate reflections. No study of Lewis can fail to engage with (and, at certain critical points, depend upon) Lewis's personal narrative of conversion. Lewis had no hesitation in referring to this "story of my conversion" as his "autobiography."[1] But what did he mean by this? What are we, his readers, to understand by this term?

The Ambivalence of Autobiography in Lewis's Literary Outlook

The teasing title of Lewis's autobiography draws on the opening words of the Miltonic sonnet of the same name by the English Romantic writer William Wordsworth (1770–1850).[2]

Surprised by joy – impatient as the wind.

Wordsworth wrote this sonnet in the aftermath of the death of his three-year-old daughter, Catherine. On experiencing a rare moment of joy following Catherine's