



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 30  
Number 1

Article 8

---

10-15-2011

## The Great War and Narnia: C.S. Lewis as Soldier and Creator

Brian Melton

Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Melton, Brian (2011) "The Great War and Narnia: C.S. Lewis as Soldier and Creator," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 30: No. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol30/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



### The Great War and Narnia: C.S. Lewis as Soldier and Creator

#### Abstract

Looks at influence of World War I in Lewis's autobiography and on war in Narnia, correcting mistaken search by some critics for deep-seated war trauma in Lewis's life. Reinforces that Lewis and Tolkien were not psychological twins, had differing personalities going into the war, and came out of it with different approaches to dealing with war in their fiction. The Chronicles being children's books, Lewis operated under certain self-imposed restrictions in writing them, and yet managed to convey some realistic lessons about war learned through his own harrowing experiences. Also addresses the issue of gaps in Lewis's autobiography.

#### Additional Keywords

War in C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Attitude toward writing for children; Lewis, C.S.—Military service—World War I (1914–1918); Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Depiction of war; War in C.S. Lewis



THE GREAT WAR AND NARNIA:  
C.S. LEWIS AS SOLDIER  
AND CREATOR<sup>1</sup>

BRIAN DELTON

WHEN IT COMES TO HIS PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN WAR, C.S. Lewis can be a difficult man to understand. It is not, of course, that Lewis is not clear on the subject when he speaks of it. On the contrary, when he does it is generally with the same incisive clarity that he applies to all other subjects. The trouble is that Lewis simply does not say much about it at all. While other famous veterans of the First World War speak at great length and in horrible detail of what they saw and did, Lewis says what little he must and no more. Some newer authors, such as K.J. Gilchrist in his book *A Morning After War: C.S. Lewis and WWI*, argue that in Lewis's general attitude lurks the monster of some undiscovered trauma that caused him to willfully "obscure facts" about his wartime past (Gilchrist 1). Others, such as Humphrey Carpenter, talk about Lewis's "silence" on his wartime service but believe that it is because the war did not affect him as much as it could have (qtd. in Gilchrist 8).

When viewed from the perspective of the present author, an historian who has already published a work on a soldier who left relatively few records behind (*Sherman's Forgotten General: Henry W. Slocum*), Lewis does not seem to be abnormally reticent. After all, he was not a significant figure in the war and did not define himself by his time in it, as other writers did. If he appears to be suspiciously quiet, it may be due to the fact that he speaks so prolifically on other subjects that his discussions on war seem slim by comparison. In reality, he addresses it often enough and to a depth that is appropriate for the context in which the various discussions occur. Lewis may not have expended much of his energy looking at his time in the trenches, but he gives everyone enough to get on with. His devotees—the present included—may wish he had said more, but, then again, they generally wish he had said more about every subject he addressed and *something* about quite a few he did not.

---

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was published in *The Lamp-Post*, the Journal of the Southern California C.S. Lewis Society in Winter 2010. Those portions are reprinted here with permission.

In the land of Narnia, war is as much a real facet of personal and political life as it was in Lewis's own world. Are there any possible ways in which his wartime experiences affected his Narnian creations? While the tracks are somewhat elusive, they are not impossible to trace in every case, and scholars need not indulge in any shady "reading between the lines" to discover parallels. While Lewis does not exhibit every stereotypical World War I influence, and in fact at times he specifically avoided allowing his war experience to affect his writing, what he faced in World War I affected Narnia in a number of distinctive ways. There are other instances where it is likely Lewis was influenced, but scholars cannot know for certain in the absence of specific explanatory evidence straight from Lewis's own pen. In those cases, it is possible to point to distinct historical parallels between worlds—the real and the imaginary—where Lewis's experience *may* have played a role. Finally, there are a number of themes that are common to many post war writers that Lewis seems to ignore altogether. These are notable by their absence.

Before proceeding, it is important to set a few boundaries and clarify a few definitions. First, this is not an attempt to deal with the general themes of violence or conflict in Narnia. "War" in this context refers to the engagement of significant numbers of the armed retainers of two or more Narnian political factions and the individual's experience of it. This generally excludes personal combat (i.e. Peter versus Fenris in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* [LWW] or his fight with Miraz in *Prince Caspian* [PC]) as well as small unit actions (i.e. Caspian's fights in *Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* and Tirian versus the Calormen squad in *The Last Battle* [LB]). Second, this article makes use of Lewis's time in World War I exclusively. World War II or his thoughts on war in general are worthy topics to be explored elsewhere. Finally, no attempt has been made to prioritize this particular influence in the complex watershed of thought that flowed together to form Lewis's imaginary world. The author makes no claims to demonstrate that any particular example or parallel is *the* primary influence in any given instance. Given the paucity of sources from Lewis about his time in the war, such a ranking is no longer possible on the practical level. Most probably, Lewis's vast experience in literature played the dominant part in his thinking—that theme has been explored elsewhere—and his military experiences served in a supporting role. In short, there are a number of other essential tributaries that eventually merged into the whole. This is just one of them.

World War I, or the "Great War" as it was called prior to World War II, began in 1914 when a tangled web of diplomatic intrigue magnified the assassination of a relatively minor royal figure into an explosion that annihilated the peace of Europe. Soon a regional conflict between the small Balkan state of Serbia and the second-rate power Austria-Hungary became an enormous struggle that dragged in most of the world's major nations, including Russia,

Germany, France, and Britain herself. What everyone expected to be a short war of movement degenerated into a murderous stalemate on the western front when the Allies checked Germany's rapid advance through Belgium and France. Both sides tried to move around the end of each other's position, extending their own lines farther and farther out. Soon, there was no longer any room left to flank and a more or less continuous line of defensive works existed from the English Channel all the way to the Swiss Alps. Having planted themselves firmly onto French soil, the Germans began a colossal entrenching program, and then dared the French and British to do something about it.

The Allies tried: again, and again, and again. Unfortunately, no one, least of all British commander Douglas Haig, really understood the situation that recent advances in technology had created on the battlefield. A combination of non-line-of-sight artillery, practical and efficient machine guns, and barbed wire made it possible for both sides to kill so many men so quickly from their defensive positions that older tactics, involving massed formations of men sent plowing across the field after a preliminary bombardment, were virtually guaranteed to fail. The German practice of building defenses in depth (one line of defenders behind the other) insured that any local successes would be quickly contained and then repulsed. For Haig, every attack he made appeared to come within an iota of success, and so he threw more and more men into the fray, which only resulted in thousands of broken and bloodied British soldiers slowly sinking into the fetid mud of no man's land—the unoccupied ground between the armies (DeGroot 1-47).

An atheistic, priggish (by his own account) Lewis spent the early years of WWI studying with William Kirkpatrick, better known as the "Great Knock," in Kirkpatrick's home in Great Bookham, Surrey (Green 41). While living there Lewis felt isolated from the war, though he noted that even in this insulated haven of study he could, if the wind was right, "hear the mutter and grumble of the far distant guns in France" (Gresham 33). Though he could have avoided service entirely, after a period of indecision Lewis chose to join up. Having crossed that important threshold, he then proceeded to segregate his mind from thinking about the war to such an extent that he later remarked that some people would likely think it "shameful." In his words, war and country "may have my body, but not my mind. I will take part in battles, but not read about them" (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* [SBJ] 158).

Lewis later left the presence of the Great Knock and traveled to Oxford to begin study to become a scholar. He had been there less than a term when his enlistment papers came through and he officially entered the army. He did not leave Oxford, but joined a cadet battalion stationed at Keble College. There he made the acquaintance of a number of aspiring scholar-warriors, including Paddy Moore, whose mother later played such a long and important role in

Lewis's life. It is notable that of the five friends who left Keble for war, Lewis alone survived (Sayer 139). After a brief period of training, Lewis was promoted to second lieutenant and attached to the Somerset Light Infantry.

Lewis arrived on the front lines in France on his nineteenth birthday in November 1917. While he would remember portions of the next five months fondly at times, overall they proved to be one of the worst periods of his life as well. He later remarked that though he understood that war was sometimes a necessity, he would rather die than live through another (*The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis* 2.258). Here too, he continued to demonstrate the remarkable ability to split off his intellect and imagination from the horrors surrounding him. If his letters to Arthur Greaves are any indication, while facing carnage and death on an almost daily basis, Lewis seemed to dwell more on what he was reading and on the various poems that would later be published as *Spirits in Bondage*. Walter Hooper remarked on this tendency when he observed that for his entire life, Lewis "had the extraordinary ability of being able to write almost anywhere" (Hooper 11).

In stark contrast to his still blossoming literary pursuits, Lewis experienced the awful reality that was World War I. He afterward described "the frights, the cold, the smell of H.E. [high explosive], the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting or standing corpses, the landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass, the boots worn day and night till they seemed to grow to your feet" (*SBJ* 196). He seems, though, to have dealt with this by withdrawing further into the shell provided by his active imagination and the literature he still managed to feed it. He observed that the reality of the war "shows rarely and faintly in memory. It is too cut off from the rest of my experience and often seems to have happened to someone else. It is even in a way unimportant. One imaginative moment [that of hearing his first bullet] seems now to matter more than the realities that followed" (*SBJ* 196).

During his time at the front, he acquitted himself well. The company he commanded won awards for guard mounting and company drill and he aided in the capture of around sixty German prisoners of war (Gilchrist 99; *SBJ* 197). During the winter Lewis spent a month in hospital recovering from a bout with trench fever, but he returned to his unit in time to face the massive German offensive in France in the spring of 1918. Having forced the Russians to make peace, the Germans transferred reinforcements west and unleashed a massive series of strokes designed to knock either Britain or France out of the war before the new American Expeditionary Force could make its presence felt. Near Mt. Bernenchon in April, as Lewis led his men forward, British shells fell amongst his troops, obliterating a respected sergeant named Harry Ayres and seriously wounding Lewis. Lewis managed to drag himself back towards friendly lines where a stretcher crew picked him up. He was eventually transported to a series

of hospitals in the rear. The war ended before he had recovered sufficiently to take the field again, and he returned to Oxford to continue his studies.

Even in the horrific instant of Lewis's wounding, he reported the same disconnect from his physical circumstances and retreat into his mind that he carried with him to war. As he observed in *Surprised by Joy*,

the moment, just after I had been hit [...] I found (or thought I found) that I was not breathing and concluded that this was death. I felt no fear and certainly no courage. It did not seem to be an occasion for either. The proposition "Here is a man dying" stood before my mind as dry, as factual, as unemotional as something in a textbook. It was not even interesting. The fruit of this experience was that when, some years later, I met Kant's distinction between the Noumenal and the Phenomenal self, it was more to me than an abstraction. (197)

While Lewis claims not have been clearly aware of this distinction before then, it is obvious that for quite some time he had the practical ability to withdraw into himself and distinguish between the creative reality of his mind on the one hand and his physical circumstances on the other. For him, this amounted to a willful decision to enjoy the interior world of the mind and spirit instead of what confronted him outside. Perhaps Puddleglum described it best in his argument with the Green Witch in *The Silver Chair* when he stated,

Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. [...] That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. (159)

Whether or not the Marsh-wiggle is vicariously speaking for Lewis, it is a tendency he seems to share with his creator.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> One reviewer of this article has objected that in this selection Puddleglum is not actually advocating a retreat into an inner world at all; rather, he is taking a stand in favor of accepting the real world over the witch's poor imitation. That is a just criticism, when viewed from the more objective perspective of the reader, who knows very well what the witch is doing. However, at the time, inside the story, Puddleglum and his friends are no longer sure of that—in fact he admits that it seems to him like the witch is probably right and that Narnia really is nothing but moonshine. If that is the case, he is in fact saying that he preferred living in their "play" world to her "real" one. Therefore, the analogy holds, though, like all analogies, it must be taken with care.

This segregation of mind was well developed prior to Lewis's actual entry into the war. He had already integrated it into his larger worldview with ease, perhaps even eagerly. Thinking back on it later, he himself remarked that "even if the attitude was right, the quality in me which made it so easy to adopt is somewhat repellent" (*SBJ* 159). Precisely where his ability came from is a question that will probably never be answered authoritatively. He may have been born with it, developed it as a child after his mother's death, it may stem from years of daydreaming and vicarious living through the literature he loved so much, or perhaps it grew up as a survival mechanism as a result of the torture he and Warren Lewis had endured at the hand of Robert Capron, the insane headmaster of his first boarding school. Whatever the case, it enabled him to endure the horrors of war but keep what he considered to be essentially himself separate and, to a certain extent, unaffected.

In practical terms Lewis's ability has led some Lewis scholars to misinterpret the war's apparent effect on him and therefore on his later work. Authors observe the obvious fact that Lewis does indeed willfully shut himself off from portions of his wartime experience and presume that some massive trauma must have preceded it. Gilchrist goes so far as to accuse Lewis of repeated "posing," "posturing," and "masking" when discussing the war (Gilchrist 67, 73, 108). In fact, Lewis's pre-existing intellectual defenses may have made it possible for him to emerge from the gauntlet carrying less emotional baggage than most. Lewis's silence on the details of his war service may then be exactly what it purports to be: silence and nothing more. Barring the new introduction of unreviewed evidence, to pursue this line of thought further, scholars must begin in advance of all evidence with the assumed premise that Lewis could not actually have meant what he said and then work downhill into varying degrees of absurdity from there.

The propensity to inject massive emotional trauma where it may not exist is exacerbated by the fact that many modern authors see war and its effect on people through the considerable mythology surrounding soldiers since American involvement in Vietnam. War is supposed to be so traumatic that part of what makes the experience of it valid to the larger academic culture is that it first desecrates and then dominates the individual who survives it. The deeper a person's emotional scars, the more credence their testimony seems to be given. People who can face war and then somehow emerge to live normal and productive lives are often treated as if their experiences are somehow less legitimate than those of people who can never adapt to the regular world (B. G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley discuss this tendency in their book, *Stolen Valor*). This leads to either the belittling of genuine veterans or, at times, the search for some hidden trauma that the scholar assumes *a priori* must exist.



On the contrary, for all the tortured souls that war leaves in its wake, there are others who are able to adapt to their experiences and move on, and Lewis may well be one of them. In "Learning in Wartime" Lewis remarked on the notion that war must by definition consume an individual, and he thought it nonsense: "Neither conversion nor enlistment in the army is going to obliterate our human life. Christians and soldiers are still men; the infidel's idea of a religious life, and the civilian's idea of active service, are fantastic" (51-52). While it is impossible to prove a negative, there is no obvious reason to believe that Lewis must, by default, be hiding some conscious or subconscious trauma and that this must be expected to necessarily bleed through into Narnia.

Of course, this is not to say that those five violent months did not affect Lewis in significant and lasting ways. Though he understood that war could be unavoidable, he never forgot its darkness, and often took the opportunity to reprove young Douglas Gresham when the boy spoke about war or warriors with "words of admiration," emphasizing that "no matter what people or newspapers or politicians try to tell you, there is no glory in war" (Gresham 44-45). He flatly stated that war literally "threatens *every* temporal evil" ("Why I Am Not a Pacifist" 89). Lewis also noted that for years after the war he suffered from terrible nightmares about being back in the trenches (Gresham 51). Even here, though, it seems that the war mostly affected an existing problem; it did not create a new one. Lewis elsewhere references the regular "night-fears" he faced while growing up and remarked that "I would not wish to heat the fires of that private hell for any child" ("On Three Ways of Writing for Children" [OTW] 30). So the war did not so much cause his fear as provide fodder for a pre-existing condition.

In the end, Lewis emerged from the war scarred and undoubtedly carrying some sort of emotional baggage—as any sane, feeling human would—but he did not continue to be dominated by it. Much of what has been blamed on what he faced in the trenches he could just as easily have carried to war with him. Retreating into his mind, he insulated himself from what he saw and did and emerged on the other side having been influenced by his experiences, but not necessarily more so than he would be by other important eras of his life.

The Great War was, in fact, simply one of a number of incidents that Lewis likely drew from when constructing his stories. Lewis's first-hand experience must be also balanced by the important literary considerations involved in his depiction of war in Narnia. The content of his thinking shows the effects of his exposure to various genres, particularly classical literature. Lewis noted in "Learning in Wartime" that he found his own war experience mirrored in Tolstoy and the *Iliad* (51-52). The massive amount of mythology he imported into Narnia is so self-evident that it is unnecessary to do more than mention it in passing. His decision to draw from the vast wealth of information he had stored

in his internal library would necessarily limit his opportunity to include his wartime experiences. There was, after all, only so much that he could fit into so few pages. Of course, these influences on Narnia have been covered exhaustively elsewhere by other authors far better qualified to discuss them than the present.

There is another practical literary concern that would check Lewis's reliance on personal experience: his goals in writing for children. Lewis did not intend to produce a hard-bitten pseudo-documentary about the Great War, nor did he wish to drag his audience through the muck and stink of the British trenches as an anti-war object lesson. Though he primarily wanted to tell a good story about a picture in his head, Lewis knew that books like his also teach. He insisted that "the only moral that is of any value is that which arises inevitably from the whole cast of the author's mind" and that we "must write for children from those elements in our own imagination which we share with children" (OTW 33). In Narnia, Lewis depicted war as he felt he would have needed to see it as a child. He wanted his audience to see real evil and real good, and he wanted them to see that by decisive, brave action, good could triumph. In one of his more famous passages on the subject, Lewis wrote,

Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise you are making their destiny not brighter but darker. [...] As far as that goes, I side impenitently with the human race against the modern reformer. Let there be wicked kings and beheadings, battles and dungeons, giants and dragons, and let villains be soundly killed at the end of the book. (OTW 31)

Lewis's purposes, then, would act much as a filter might, straining out inappropriate facts and ideas gleaned during the war from expression in a Narnian context.

Still, it is possible to point to a number of strong correlations between war in Narnia and war as Lewis knew it. The first involves a notable *exclusive influence*, meaning that Lewis's experiences probably led him to keep a theme *out* of his creative world. The second category is *inclusive*, and it is possible that Lewis inserted these ideas into Narnia due to something he saw personally in France or in the army in general. The final group contains those ideas that might be called *missing in action* (MIA), since they are themes that are prominent in the writings of other veterans—including his fellow don and Inkling J.R.R. Tolkien—but are absent from Lewis. These ideas are distinguished from those in the *exclusive* section by the fact that there is nothing to suggest one way or the other why Lewis did not address them. Their absence may be intentional or it may just be incidental; there is simply no way to tell from this distance in time.

One final disclaimer before proceeding, in the hopes of avoiding a trap Lewis himself spoke out against: the following attempts to lay out a series of parallels between Lewis's historical experience and what later appeared in Narnia, and then offer some reasonable speculations on how they *could* be connected, based on existing evidence. It does not try to psychoanalyze Lewis in the traditional sense or to produce absolute results regarding his motivations. Lewis legitimately disliked the trend amongst Freudian peers who claimed to know more about their subjects than their subjects knew about themselves. The current approach is therefore more historical than it is literary or psychoanalytic. The parallels are there, but what they mean and why they are there—whether by chance or intention—is open for debate in the absence of clear guidance from Lewis himself.

### **An Exclusive Effect**

The primary example of Lewis excluding something from Narnia due to his wartime experience involves his attitude towards the dead. More particularly, it is evident in the complete absence of mangled bodies from the battlefields of Narnia (Aslan on the Stone Table notwithstanding). Lewis developed a visceral abhorrence for corpses at an early age, when he saw his mother's body laid out on a bed. As was custom, he had been forced to go into the room and pay his respects. This left a mark on him, which his later experiences only worsened. The dead were the World War I soldier's constant companion. At the front and in no man's land, they could be encountered anywhere, in every imaginable position and state of decay. As mentioned before, Lewis saw them lying prone, sitting where they died, and standing up, caught in mud or propped against a tree. Recalling Lewis's description of war, Gresham observed that "He learned to eat whatever food was put before him, often within both the sight and smell of dead men, both friend and foe. He learned how to tell the nationality of a dead soldier by the smell of the body as it began to rot" (43). Lewis noted that "both [...] the very old and the very recent dead confirmed that view of corpses which had been formed the moment I saw my dead mother" (*SBJ* 195-196).

Despite the fact that the battles in Narnia are at times quite large, Lewis never mentions any corpses after a battle whatsoever. It is not that Lewis chose to explain the corpses away through some omnipotent literary device, like Lucy's cordial. They simply never make an appearance, anywhere. Once someone falls dead he or she simply vanishes. The closest he comes to acknowledging the presence of the dead is in *The Horse and His Boy*, when Corin observes the vultures above Anvard, and that is not a direct reference in itself (176). Lewis never once mentions the harsh reality of burying the dead, friend or foe, and he never shows the aforementioned carrion in action. At some points, he seems to imply that the nasty business of cleaning up is actually being taken care of "off

screen," so to speak, but in general he forgot about or avoided the issue altogether. For example, at the end of the Battle of Anvard, in *The Horse and His Boy*, somewhere between twenty-four and thirty six hours after the fight they hold a party "on the lawn before the castle, with dozens of lanterns to help the moonlight" (213). This is presumably the very same lawn that had been strewn with carcasses the day before, including men, horses, and at least one giant (who would have been quite difficult to dispose of by default). A more prominent situation presents itself earlier in Narnian history when, after having defeated and slaughtered Jadis and her dark retainers, Peter's army sits "where they were" and enjoys a "fine high tea" on the grass. They then sleep on the battlefield itself, something not likely to happen if the area really were strewn with contorted, maimed bodies (LWW 178). In *Prince Caspian*, the celebration actually begins before the battle itself ends, and no practical time is allowed for any burial parties, though perhaps it might be argued that Bacchus took care of this oversight with his handy ivy (204-207).

In "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," Lewis remarked that in his stories "I put in what I would have liked to read when I was a child and what I still like reading now that I am in my fifties" (22). It is clear that Lewis did not enjoy reading about mortal remains at any age.

### **Inclusive Effects**

This category of influences involves ideas and depictions in Narnia that are, to at least some extent, traceable to something Lewis saw or experienced in the Great War. While not all of the lines of evidence are as obvious as would be preferred, they are clear enough to make at least a strong circumstantial case for a connection.

First, there is a sense of dark realism that pervades Narnian war. War and its accoutrements in Narnia are no more glorious or frivolous than in real life. There is no sense of fun or grandeur in any of the various Narnian scenes. For instance, when Aslan prepared Peter for battle in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, his advice was purely straightforward and down-to-earth. There was no hint of war as a game, beyond a very brief scene where Peter showed off his sword to Mr. Beaver—something that is more likely a comment on young boys than on war (LWW 105, 143-144). Later, in the battle itself, there were praiseworthy heroics, but they were of the sort inspired by hard necessity rather than a desire for laurels and victory was purchased dearly. Edmund's fight with the Witch was the stuff of song and legend, but ended with him shattered, broken, and bloody (LWW 175-176). Caspian's war against his uncle was anything but glorious, with the rebels shortly pinned up in Aslan's How to be ground slowly down by Miraz's superior forces. The aftermath of the failed attack before Caspian blew Susan's horn speaks for itself: "The best of the bears

had been hurt, a centaur terribly wounded, and there were few in Caspian's party that had not lost blood. It was a gloomy party that huddled under the dripping trees to eat their scanty supper" (PC 88). Shasta also observed the same sort of dull frankness as he watched the Narnians prepare to relieve the siege of Anvard in *The Horse and His Boy*. The archers testing their strings, the giants donning their spiked boots, the big cats prowling, soldiers checking their equipment, all took place in general silence. There was no mindless boasting, no singing, or jesting. Even the usually boisterous Corin became solemn, pointing out the vultures circling overhead, as mentioned previously. "They know we're preparing a feed for them," he said (176). Later, when Aravis remarked that it "must have been wonderful" to be in the battle, Shasta simply replied that it "Wasn't at all like what I thought," implying that he had been disabused of some of his more boyish notions (197).

The actual fighting itself is also surprisingly harsh for what modern readers would expect from a "children's book," though Lewis is careful not to carry it to excess. While Lewis described the large battle at the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in mostly general terms, in *The Horse and His Boy* he was more frank. The Hermit of the Southern March, while keeping Aravis and the horses apprised of the fighting notes that he saw one of the giants fall, "shot through the eye, I suppose." Later he stated that "King Edmund is dealing marvelous strokes. He's just slashed Corradin's head off." When judging Rabadash, King Lune plainly remarked that to "have cut his throat in the battle would have eased my heart mightily." Edmund agreed, hoping that if Rabadash broke his word again, that it would be in a place where he could "swap off his head in clean battle" (182, 184, 206).

It does not take much imagination to see in this the harsh realism of Lewis's own experience in the army. Rather than using literature to obscure reality, here he uses reality to keep literature in check. World War I taught Lewis that wars are not to be encouraged, but treated with cold practicality by those who must face them. Lewis believed that the "child as reader is neither to be patronized nor idolized: we talk to him as man to man" (OTW 34). In the Chronicles, Lewis did so.

Next, as was the case with Lewis himself, war in Narnia never seems to wholly consume those who take part in it. They emerge on the other side still essentially themselves. Probably the two best examples of this are Peter and Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The war against Jadis is easily one of the largest and most costly discussed in the Chronicles, second in size perhaps only to Caspian's fight against the Telmarines. Even though Aslan and Lucy saved many injured, the implication is that there are a significant number of dead. Peter watched his soldiers die in front of him as he fought a desperate

battle. Edmund had been brutally wounded by Jadis. Even Lucy's cordial would be unlikely to heal such emotional scars (*LWW* 142-186).

The transformation that the boys undergo is notable, but not complete. They are not the same, but neither are they so changed as to no longer be recognizably themselves. When Lucy arrives on the field with Aslan, she finds it odd "to see Peter looking as he looked now—his face was so pale and stern and he seemed so much older" (*LWW* 175). Rather than being left scarred and dysfunctional, Peter became "a tall and deep chested man and a great warrior, and he was called King Peter the Magnificent" (*LWW* 181). Edmund's case is less obvious, since he also benefitted from Lucy's ministrations and it is impossible to distinguish what cause resulted in which effect. Still, after the battle Edmund becomes "his real old self again and could look you in the face" (177). He later "was a quieter and graver man than Peter and great in council and judgment. He was called King Edmund the Just" (*LWW* 181). The older Edmund presented in *The Horse and His Boy* only deepens and illustrates this.

When Lewis came out of the hospital in 1918, he had earned no magnificent surname and was not likely any deeper-chested than before, but, as noted above, he was still essentially Jack Lewis. Older, graver perhaps, but not so radically changed that he did not know himself. The essential point is clear. All three youths carried a certain character into the war, and all three emerged with that same basic character intact. War marked both Lewis and the Pevensies indelibly, leaving them changed in sometimes critical ways, but the experience did not ruin them as individuals and could in fact have helped them mature. They faced it out of necessity and afterward they did not dwell on its horrors without reason. War became one more stream of experience in a much longer tale; part of them, but not the whole.

Next, Lewis's pictures—the few times they occur—of the wounded also exhibit a strong edge of realism, most likely born of his time on the front. For all the fighting and killing that takes place in Narnia and despite the fact that Lewis generally adopts a straightforward approach to war, readers see very few close descriptions of those on whom the course battle has not been kind. This, of course, is probably due to Lewis's expressed desire not to inflict "any haunting dread in the minds of children" (*OTW* 31). He includes these descriptions only when necessary, and pushes them only to the extent he must.

Still, when the wounded do appear, their injuries are frighteningly real. The most obvious of these is Edmund, after his battle with Jadis. Lucy found him "in the charge of Mrs. Beaver a little way back from the fighting line. He was covered with blood, his mouth was open, and his face a nasty green colour" (*LWW* 176). In *Prince Caspian*, Reepicheep is, if anything, even more gravely wounded than Edmund. He was borne to Aslan on a small litter after the battle, "little better than a damp heap of fur; all that was left of Reepicheep. He was still

breathing, but more dead than alive, gashed with innumerable wounds, one paw crushed, and, where his tail had been, a bandaged stump." Even after Lucy tended him with her miracle cure, there was "a long and anxious silence" before it became clear that the chief mouse would survive (201).

While Lewis does not regale his readers with many disturbing firsthand accounts of what he saw at the front, what little he does say makes plain that he had probably seen his share of horribly wounded men. His brief but disgustingly brilliant description of them quoted above ("half-crushed beetles") could hardly be more real. He would not have had to venture too deeply into his memory to dredge up a very genuine picture upon which to base his description of Edmund and, with a few necessary modifications, Reepicheep. If anything, his self-imposed literary limitations would have to moderate his memory and prevent him from including too many details. This does not mean that he is "posing" at all; he has made no claims to writing a "real" war history.

Lucy's cordial itself may be an example of wishful thinking regarding the wounded. That small crystal vial is nothing more or less than a soldier's ideal. Lewis, jolting his way painfully from the front in an ambulance or lying frustrated in some hospital bed, may well have wished for something like it. While he no doubt wanted to avoid returning to the trenches, in hindsight, with the end of the war so near, it would make sense for him to wish vaguely for some *deus ex machina* to rescue him from the frustration of hospital life, which he later described as disagreeable. He almost certainly would have wished for something that could have saved all of his wounded friends.

Another, more personal correlation between the wounded in Europe and war in Narnia comes from Shasta, though it may not be very significant. It is interesting that Shasta had only one wound to show for his trouble when he met Aravis after the fight at Anvard. When he arrived, announced by his true name of Cor, Aravis noticed that his "left hand [...] was bandaged" (*HHB* 196). While this cannot be pressed too far, it is notable that of Lewis's own wounds, the one on his left hand gave him the most trouble throughout the rest of his life (Sayer 132). Shasta, like Lewis, found the injury to be merely annoying and not serious, though he did not receive it in nearly so dramatic a fashion as Lewis. Shasta scraped his knuckles, while Lewis survived an explosion.

An emotional parallel between Lewis's life and Narnia appears in his own description of his first experience of combat and what happens to his characters. There is a clear sense of nerves and fear, but also a feeling of the surreal. The environment around the observer seems to change somewhat from actual reality. In the case of Shasta at the Battle of Anvard, everything around him slowed down and became focused to an absolute pinpoint. Terror and necessity mingled in one moment and he saw far more than the scant few seconds would seem to allow:

And now a gallop. The ground between the two armies grew less every moment. Faster, faster. All swords out now, all shields up to the nose, all prayers said, all teeth clenched. Shasta was dreadfully frightened. But it suddenly came into his head "If you funk this, you'll funk every battle all your life. Now or never." (*HFB* 179)

Then, suddenly, the world turns into chaos, and Shasta can no longer follow what is going on.

Here the author must retreat somewhat from the strict delineations offered earlier and allow some evidence from Peter's battle with Fenris. This is appropriate, given that in a very real way, all combat is personal; the only question is how many persons are taking part at any given moment. Peter's reaction to his first taste of combat—which Lewis himself called Peter's "First Battle" in the chapter title—was very similar to Shasta's. In the moment he charged the wolf, "Peter did not feel very brave; indeed, he felt he was going to be sick. But that made no difference to what he had to do" (*LWW* 127). There is also a hint of the same confusion and distortion of time, when there are more things going on in a "moment" than would normally be possible.

This compares favorably with Lewis's own description of the first moment he personally experienced enemy fire. For Lewis too, it seemed unreal and fantastic. His own word for it was "imaginative." He went on to state that it was "the first bullet I heard—so far from me that it 'whined' like a journalist's or a peacetime poet's bullet. At that moment there was something not exactly like fear, much less like indifference: a little quavering signal that said, 'This is War. This is what Homer wrote about'" (*SBJ* 196). While Lewis did not mention a subsequent charge in his description, the same sense of a suspension of reality and some sort of tempered fear response are both present. Lewis most likely had this moment or one like it in mind when he penned Shasta and Peter's descent into war.

A more physical comparison presents itself when turning to the question of fortifications in Narnia. While most often thought of as residences for the various personalities of the world, they are also intended to serve a more militant purpose. Cair Paravel, Jadis's Castle, Anvard, and the small towers in *The Last Battle* are all designed to be comfortable and yet are also strong points from which Narnians can defend their lands. Viewed from the general context of the Great War, it is interesting that Narnians exhibit a peculiarly British attitude toward fortifications and their use. Unfortunately, in all but one example, they have reason to regret this.

During World War I, the Germans tended to build more complex trenches and then wait for their opponents to come to them. As noted previously, they could afford this luxury since, as they occupied French territory, they could



expect their enemies to attack in an attempt to drive them out. The Allies, on the other hand, took less care in trench construction for the simple reason that they never planned to stay in them long. British General Haig remained fixated on restoring movement to his army, believing that each new attack would be the one to break the German line. As such, British positions were often less complicated and less well equipped. While the Germans hauled in tons of concrete and steel and wired their trenches for electricity, the British (and to a lesser extent, the French) tended to make do with the bare necessities and constantly came out of their trenches to attack their enemies (DeGroot 33).

There could hardly be a better general description of Narnia's construction and use of her strongholds. A number of them are rather simple in design and exhibit none of the post-Crusades refinements of the high Middle Ages. While readers are not given much information on the specific defenses of Cair Paravel, both Anvard and the Witch's Castle lack even a moat (In Jadis's defense, a frozen moat would do little good, but a dry moat would be practical). These oversights cost the Witch in her war with Aslan and Cair Paravel in its last defense. Anvard was able to survive only by the timely arrival of reinforcements. Had Edmund's army been delayed, the lack of a more in-depth defense would have allowed Rabadash and his force to batter down the gate with little more than a tree trunk (*HHB* 178-179).

This lack of strong fortifications seems to have been due to the fact that, like the British, the Narnians preferred the offensive when provoked. Narnians—good and evil—very rarely actually *fight* from behind their prepared works. They are constantly coming *out* of them and fighting in the open, where their defenses do not benefit them in the least. While Aslan thought that Jadis might withdraw to her castle to face a siege in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, she actually attacked Peter's army directly. As a result, she lost when reinforcements were freed from her undefended home and overwhelmed her in a sudden rush (164-176). In *Prince Caspian*, while Dr. Cornelius talked at length about the defensive advantages offered by Aslan's How, once Caspian's army occupied it he repeatedly launched sorties to attack Miraz's forces on open ground, where the Telmarines obviously had the advantage. The battles usually ended in stinging defeats for Caspian, who eventually relied on Aslan and an army of reawakened trees for victory (85-93). Only at Anvard in *The Horse and His Boy* did the defenders actually put their advantages to good use, and even there they emerged from the castle to go on the attack at the first opportunity (175-185).

Lewis himself never explained his reasoning on the issue, and so it is now impossible to push this claim to an absolute conclusion. Yet, there is a strong correlation between the way Lewis's own people utilized their trenches in the war in which he participated and how the Narnians themselves used their closest equivalents. In this, the Narnians seem to be distinctively British.

### Missing in Action

Janet Brennan Croft, in her book *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, identified a number of clear and logical ways in which World War I affected “Tollers” and his epic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. These themes are often present in a much broader sampling of post-war authors. Lewis in all likelihood heard them in Tolkien’s writing as he sat listening to him in the evenings with the other Inklings, and Tolkien had an opportunity to remind Lewis of them—if he so desired—as he in turn listened to and critiqued Narnia. It is therefore interesting to note that a number of these “traditional” Great War themes do not seem to have affected Lewis as might be expected.

According to Croft, much of war in Middle-earth seems to reflect war in Northern Europe, though obviously it was translated culturally/technologically. The general and complete waste of the land as a result of conflict and the large, highly organized armies Sauron marched into combat are cases in point. The treatment of the orcs bears some similarity to the British view of the Germans in the first half of the Twentieth Century. To anyone with an even cursory knowledge of life during the Great War, these ideas make perfect sense and are, in fact, almost predictable. It would be logical for an author who experienced them first hand to include them, but with Lewis, a significant number of Croft’s themes simply do not appear in Narnia or if they do, they are decidedly muted.

Of course, as noted above, Lewis possessed a separate, interior life where he spent much of his time and which he fed with copious amounts of imaginative material. Lewis’s emphasis on his own imagination and his ability to withdraw into it meant that in a very real sense he “experienced” whatever he read first hand. The simple fact that something took place in the “real” world as opposed to his imagination did not give it any particular primacy in his scheme of Narnian influences. His experience of war in person and vicariously were therefore simply two significant strands in the much larger tapestry, and it is probable that the following are instances where the literary overshadowed the historical.

First among these missing points is presence of huge, well-organized armies. In World War I, Allied and German forces literally reached into the millions of men, and they had very well defined structures of command from a supreme commander down to the lowliest private. There is no sense of this at all in Lewis. The armies that the Narnians fielded are generally small, numbering not more than a few thousand (perhaps hundred) soldiers at a time, though Lewis obviously never gave a detailed order of battle. There are a few references to individual leaders (Fenris Ulf, is one instance), but no detailed division of command into coherent units. In this sense, Narnian war-making was much more feudal than modern. The troops were not professional soldiers who made up an officially trained army so much as they were individuals with other lives

and pursuits who make war part-time at the request of the king or queen. Even Calormen, while demonstrably more war-like, operated in a similar way.

Of course, Lewis himself was a civilian who took up arms in the war, but this analogy can only be carried so far in a broader understanding of modern warfare. In most of Twentieth Century Europe, nations maintained huge standing armies of professional soldiers, which were then expanded greatly at need by the addition of draftees from the larger populace. The draftees (or volunteers, in Lewis's case) essentially became professionals for the time they were in and were treated as such. This is, of course, a very different approach compared to the feudal or militia system evident in Narnia and Calormen.

Next, Narnian wars tend to be quickly fought conflicts of movement, rather than a longer, grinding stalemate like the Western Front. With the exception of Caspian's war against the Telmarines, most Narnian campaigns are fought in days or weeks as opposed to months and years. Even Tolkien had a complete history of diplomatic intrigue and military maneuvering worked out that took place over the course of decades in Middle-earth to explain the specific events that were accomplished in one year in his trilogy. There is no sense of this at all in Lewis.

Another significant missing theme that might be expected to appear is the general destruction left in the wake of war. Unlike France in World War I, Narnia was never laid waste as a result of war itself. Blight and destruction were present in the *Chronicles*, but they were a result of a pre-existing evil, not war itself. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Narnia suffered under the crushing weight of a perpetual winter, but this was a result of Jadis herself, not the war against her. In *Prince Caspian* the land of Narnia was mostly green and fertile, even if its native denizens were being hunted and Cair Paravel left to fall to ruins. In both cases, war actually freed the land to improve further; it did not desecrate or destroy it. The only hint of destruction as a result of war comes in *The Last Battle* when the Calormene soldiers began their deforestation project. Even here, though, it can easily be argued that the brief war itself did not lead to destruction—Shift's greed did.

Further, there is none of the dirt, stink, and grit that Lewis manifestly experienced in the trenches, and in fact the Narnians do not seem to be interested in trenches at all, however useful they might be as defensive positions. Spatially, Narnians tended to think upward instead of downward in terms of war. The fortifications of Narnia—castles and towers—are built on top of the ground rather than excavated into it. Even the defense of Aslan's How, the closest Lewis ever comes to anything remotely like trench warfare in Narnia, demonstrates this tendency. While the British trenches Lewis served in were obviously dug *down* into the ground, the How was heaped up *above* the stone table to make an

artificial hill. Inside, there was none of the sense of cramped, disgusting filth that Lewis saw in France. Instead, it was spacious, roomy, and clean (*PC* 89).

A final obviously-absent theme is the demonization of human enemies in Narnia. In her discussion of Tolkien's orcs, Croft notes that the common attitudes evident in World War I stressed the differences between "us" and "them" *ad absurdum* (47-48). The Germans were essentially dehumanized to the point where they lost individual identities and were more a force of nature, and a very evil one at that. There is no real sense of this with Lewis's human enemies in Narnia. The two largest opponent groups—the Telmarines from *Prince Caspian* and the various appearances of the citizens of Calormen—were very much living, human races. They had unique names and personalities, like Glozelle, Sopespian, Corradin, and Emeth. Some of them were evil, but in a very human sense, meaning that their own backgrounds and experiences interacted with their free will to harden them into making consistently evil choices, such as the haughty and childish Prince Rabadash. In these cases, there was no sense that these people *must* act this way because they *were* evil beyond redemption. Other enemies simply followed evil orders in good faith, such as the "burly, decent-looking fellow" who stepped up to take advantage of Aslan's offer to return to Earth at the end of *Prince Caspian* or Emeth, the faithful Calormen soldier in *The Last Battle* who entered the Stable in search of his god and instead found Aslan (*PC* 212, *LB* 159-166). Salvation was clearly possible for all of these anti-Narnians. Aslan offered it repeatedly to Rabadash at the end of *The Horse and His Boy* while Emeth received it, as did apparently thousands of younger Telmarines in *Prince Caspian* (*HBB* 203-213, *LB* 159-166, *PC* 207-208).

That said, Lewis does demonize some enemies, but those he does are, appropriately, somewhat demonic already. Lewis only treats traditionally evil, non-human entities as beyond redemption. In these cases, he clearly gives a sense of "us" and "them," stating plainly that there is real, permanent evil that needs to be destroyed, not coddled, tolerated, or even negotiated with. The witches (white and green) were foremost among these, but Jadis herself also gave a nice list of beings when she called her retainers to do battle with Aslan's army:

Summon all *our people* to meet me here as speedily as they can. Call out the giants and the werewolves and the spirits of those trees who are on our side. Call the Ghouls, and the Boggles, the Ogres and the Minotaurs. Call the Cruels, the Hags, the Spectres, and the people of the Toadstools. We will fight. (*LWW* 132, emphasis added)

While apparently some mythological creatures can choose which master to serve (i.e. naiads, dryads, dwarfs, giants, and Earthmen), others seem simply set in their evil ways and Aslan made no attempt to rehabilitate them. Instead, they were hunted and destroyed and "in the end all that foul brood was stamped out"

(LWW 180).<sup>3</sup> This would fit the definition of “demonization” but since the creatures involved were never human to begin with, it would require several odd anthropomorphic leaps in logic to establish any necessary connection to Germans in World War I, especially given that Lewis depicts human enemies in a very different way.

In conclusion, Lewis’s time in the army affected him in definite ways, though not as much as it might be supposed. While it did not annihilate his essential self or inflict such trauma that he was unable to function afterward (as it did for some others), the war did exert a significant influence on his already extant personality. It became an important part of the much larger and complex tapestry that was Lewis, and was one of several springs which flowed into the creative pool of his considerable imagination. Lewis drew on his experience in distinguishable ways, and in a real sense the trenches of France affected how the Narnians pursued war.

#### WORKS CITED

- Burkett, B. G. and Glenna Whitley. *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History*. Dallas, TX: Verity Press, 1998.
- Croft, Janet Brennan. *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.
- De Groot, Gerard J. *The First World War*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Gilchrist, K. J. *A Morning After War: C.S. Lewis and WWI*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.
- Green, Roger Lancelyn and Walter Hooper. *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974.
- Gresham, Douglas. *Jack’s Life: The Life Story of C.S. Lewis*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005.
- Hooper, Walter, ed. *C.S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Vol. 2. Walter Hooper, ed. San Francisco: HarperSanfrancisco, 2004.
- . *The Horse and His Boy*. New York: Collier, 1970.
- . *The Last Battle*. New York: Collier, 1970.
- . “Learning in Wartime.” In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: HarperOne, 2001. 47-63.
- . *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. New York: Scholastic, 1987.

---

<sup>3</sup> This is obviously at odds with the recent movie versions of the book, where there are good and bad mythological creatures on both sides—particularly minotaurs. It would seem the writers and directors missed Lewis’s point about having to face real evil.

- . “On Three Ways of Writing for Children.” In *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. San Diego: Harvest, 1994. 22-34.
  - . *Prince Caspian*. New York: Collier, 1972.
  - . *The Silver Chair*. New York: Collier, 1970.
  - . *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. Orlando, FL: Harvest Books, 1955.
  - . “Why I Am Not a Pacifist.” In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: HarperOne, 2001. 64-90.
- Sayer, George. *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BRIAN MELTON** attended Toccoa Falls College for his bachelors in Philosophy and Religion and Texas Christian University for his M.A. and Ph.D. in U.S. History. He currently teaches U.S. history and historical methods at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. His first book, *Sherman’s Forgotten General: Henry W. Slocum*, came out with the University of Missouri Press in 2007 and he has another short book on Robert E. Lee coming out with ABC-CLIO. His first novel, *Waverly Hall: Relois*, is now out with Lantern Hollow Press. He has also been published in the field of Lewis studies, with an article out in *The Lamp-Post* (Winter 2010).

