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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>



### Abstract

Recounts the experiences of eight women (including the author) who knew C.S. Lewis.

### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Attitude toward women; Lewis, C.S.—Personal reminiscences; Lewis, C.S.—Relations with women



# C.S. Lewis:

## Reactions

### from Women

by Kathryn Lindskoog

I HAVE A QUARREL with Owen Barfield. He has said that C. S. Lewis could properly be called a misogynist on the theoretical level. As a feminist and a Lewis lover I may try to disprove that claim some day.

Fortunately, Barfield went on to assure people that Lewis was not at all a misogynist in his personal life. I can bear witness to that, and I will. When Glen [GoodKnight] invited me speak [at Mythcon V], he suggested that I tell about my own encounter with Lewis. I'll do that and more. I'll tell you a bit about C. S. Lewis and eight women who encountered him: Flora, Hope, Janie, Joy, Kathryn, Caroline, Kathleen, and Kaye. These include his mother, his cousin, his foster mother, his wife, a student, a church executive, a poet, and an editor.

THE FIRST WOMAN in C. S. Lewis's life was, I think, the most important of all. She was Florence Augusta Hamilton Lewis of Belfast. She was the daughter of an eloquent Irish preacher who sometimes wept in the pulpit and his extremely bright and eccentric wife Mary who excelled in logic but ran a very topsy-turvy (and dirty) home. From this peculiar background the second daughter, Florence Augusta, called Flora, was sent to college to study math. She was brilliant in mathematics and logic and had a calm, sunny disposition.

When Flora was 24 her neighbor Albert Lewis, a young lawyer, told her he was in love with her. Staying calm, sunny, and logical, Flora didn't rush into marriage. She kept Albert waiting eight years and finally married him when she was 32 years old. She gave birth to their first son Warren Hamilton Lewis when she was 33. She named him after her parents. When she was 36 she gave birth to her second and last child and named him Clive Staples Lewis. Why she named her baby "Clive Staples" is a mystery not even explained in the new Lewis biography by Green and Hooper. Since the Lewis family history consists of eleven volumes, each containing some 300 pages of single-spaced typing, I hope we will eventually learn what Flora had in mind.\* All we know is that when he was four she gave in to his sensible and stubborn decision to be called Jack from then on.

Flora Lewis was a tutor and companion to her boys, and then when Jack was only nine and she was 46 she died of cancer. She died on her husband's forty-fifth birthday, when the quotation on his calendar was Shakespeare's line "Men must endure their going hence." Her husband always kept that page of his calendar, and that line is now inscribed on C. S. Lewis's tombstone.

Flora's death was the end of the old world for Albert Lewis and his two sons. Their home was never happy again. It would be fifty years before Jack lived happily with a woman again. One can only speculate about how Flora's personality and early death shaped his later life.

\* Since Mythcon V, I have asked Walter Hooper in a letter if he knew the source of the name Clive Staples. He answered that Staples was the name of one of Lewis's great-great-grandfathers on his mother's side, a John Staples who lived in the 1700's. Hooper assumed that Clive was also a family name, but he does not know about it.

There is one glaring contrast between C. S. Lewis and his mother. She was gifted in math and he was a dunderhead in math. Even with special remedial tutoring he couldn't pass the entrance test in math to enable him to attend Oxford, and he was fortunate to be admitted by a waiver for World War I veterans. As I understand it, his grasp of mathematical concepts was fine, but he disliked ordinary computation. Walter Hooper says that Lewis couldn't even understand the difference between net and gross and had to be restrained by Owen Barfield from giving away more money than he earned. His generosity was that extreme, but I don't believe his ignorance was.

Walter Hooper also claims that Jack's brother Warren Lewis was so inept at figures that he got the unreasonable idea that he was poor in his last years and took to smoking a certain cheap brand of cigarettes which he disliked just in order to get the coupons that came with them to cash in for free socks! It is a fact that there was some delightful eccentricity in the family along with the brilliance. Both qualities came from both sides of the family.

UNFORTUNATELY, NO WORDS from Flora Lewis about her son Jack or anything else are yet available to the public. However, we can pause briefly to hear the words of Flora's lovely Belfast cousin Hope (Charlotte Hope Ewart Harding). Hope was no doubt one of the first women who ever met Jack, and she knew him well. When he was fourteen she called him Jacko and wrote to his father, "I always knew he was a remarkable boy, besides being one of the most lovable I ever came across." (If you have read his autobiography, you know that he didn't describe himself so kindly at that awkward age.)

FIVE YEARS AFTER Cousin Hope called Jack one of the most lovable boys she ever came across, another woman wrote in a letter, "Jack has been so good to me. My poor son asked him to look after me if he did not come back. He possesses for a boy of his age such a wonderful power of understanding and sympathy." Those were the words of Mrs. Janie King Askins Moore. Lewis was 19 and Mrs. Moore was 46. If she thought he had already been good to her then, she should have foreseen the 33 years to come. Lewis stuck with her until she died.

The story of this involvement is familiar to people who know C. S. Lewis's life. Paddy Moore had taken Jack home to meet his middle-aged mother and younger sister Maureen before the two boys were shipped to France. Albert Lewis refused Jack's urgent pleading to come to see him for perhaps the last time when he was leaving for the front, and he refused to come to England to see him afterwards when he was recuperating from wounds in the hospital. Mrs. Moore was there both times to fill the gap. Mrs. Moore was reportedly still handsome at 46. That was the very age that Flora had been when Jack has lost her. In his loneliness, Jack became temporarily infatuated with Mrs. Moore. They started living together as mother and son.

Aside from being 46 years old, Mrs. Moore had little in common with the long-lost Flora. Mrs. Moore had the opposite of a sunny disposition and was never calm or logical. She never bothered to read a book, and she talked mainly about herself.

As time went on, Jack became a Christian and she became an atheist. When he was at home she interrupted him ruthlessly to help her with household work and errands. She also had her teenage daughter Maureen and a couple of maids and a gardener, of course, but the house was always in tumult and every day seemed to bring new crises. If you listen to Lewis's tapes on love you will find Mrs. Moore's quarrels with her daughter briefly described midway through *storge*, although of course she is not identified by name. In her last years Mrs. Moore became bedfast and ended up in a nursing home where Lewis visited her every day. She finally died in 1951.

Perhaps Paddy Moore was better off being killed in the war than he would have been if he had lived all those years with that woman, who claimed shortly after his death, "I just lived my life for my son..." At least C.S. Lewis, her unofficial foster-son, was spared the burden of having her live her life just for him. Her daughter Maureen was the one who had to endure that burden after Paddy was gone. Maureen, now Lady Dunbar of Hempriggs, has so far remained totally silent about her years in the C.S. Lewis household and hasn't given us one word about her "foster brother."

IT WAS 1951, the year Mrs. Moore died, when a book was published in America entitled *These Found the Way*, which included an essay by the writer Helen Joy Davidman Gresham telling how she had moved from atheism to Christianity. The very next year Joy made another move—from America to England—and arrived with her two sons on C.S. Lewis's doorstep. What she hadn't mentioned in her essay was that the books of C.S. Lewis had influenced her conversion and that she, like many other Lewis readers, had been exchanging letters with him. She and Jack became great good friends until he realized her romantic intentions and started hiding when he saw her coming up his walk. She returned to America for a divorce from her husband, who was involved with another woman, and returned to England to resume her friendship with Jack.

Five years after Mrs. Moore died, in 1956, the British Government refused to renew Joy's permit to remain in England; no one seems to know why. On April 23 Jack actually married her in secret in a civil ceremony to enable her to stay in England permanently—but not to enable her to move in with him. He was still a bachelor. He made this very clear in a legal document that he drew up at the time. His feelings for Joy had moved from *agape* (Christian love) to *philia* (friendship). He had no idea that they were going to keep on moving.

IT WAS THREE DAYS before Jack's civil marriage to Joy that I wrote to him for the first time to ask if I could hear him lecture or meet him while I was to be studying at the University of London that summer. I wrote to him from my college town, Redlands, California. I realize now that my address probably reminded him of Redlands, England, where Mrs. Moore had lived when he got involved with her. Incidentally, I carelessly signed my letter to him "Sincerely, Kay Stillwell" without indicating my sex or marital status.

Mails went faster in those days, and on the day after his civil marriage to Joy he wrote me the following letter:

Dear Mr. (or Miss? or Mrs.?) Stillwell,

How nice to hear from anyone who still believes in adjectives and calls them the "Narnian" not the "Narnia" series.

For most of July I shall be at The Kilns, Headington Quarry, Oxford, and happy to arrange a meeting if you are there.

Yours Sincerely,

C.S. Lewis

I stopped at Wheaton College for a conference on the way east in June and met Dr. Clyde Kilby there. He said that he was surprised that Lewis would agree to see me, since he was said to be a woman-hater. The previous year Dr. Kilby had gone to meet C.S. Lewis and had left dear Mrs. Kilby out in the car for fear that her female presence would offend Lewis.

As soon as I arrived in London I wrote to Lewis again.

This time he answered:

Dear Miss Stillwell,

Friday 20th is the only day that is possible. Will you meet me for tea at the Royal Oxford Hotel (just outside the railway station) at 4 o'clock. I do not ask you to this house because you would never be able to find it, and, even if you did, it is so far out that most of your time would be taken up enroute.

Yours Sincerely,

C.S. Lewis

I took the train to Oxford, left my little bag at a cheap hotel room, and set off for the Royal Oxford. As I approached it I became panicky. I didn't even know what the man looked like! I entered the hotel in a state of intense fear and hope, and there in the lobby Lewis arose from the sofa where he was awaiting me and had me sit down next to him. The fact that I was sitting on the same sofa with C.S. Lewis made me afraid that I would fall off the sofa. I was absolutely giddy with awe.

I had discovered C.S. Lewis two years before this meeting, and he had dominated my intellectual life from that time until I

met him. The time, place, and manner of my discovering C.S. Lewis is of passing interest, at least to me. Flora Lewis's death took place on August 23, 1908, when she was 46 years old. It was 46 years after Flora's death, on August 23, 1954, when one of my boyfriends brought me a Lewis book from the public library to see how I would like it. (That was 20 years ago this weekend.) You could say that I was mentally married to C.S. Lewis that very day. A few years later I married the boyfriend who had brought the book over. My commitments to C.S. Lewis and to my husband both took place in Santa Ana, which is the Spanish way of saying St. Anne's—for whatever that is worth.

So I had come all the way from Santa Ana to Oxford, and the first thing C.S. Lewis did was to pull out his cigarettes and offer me one. I had to confess that I didn't smoke, and like another man I know who met him later, for once I wished I did. But Lewis congratulated me and advised me never to get started, and I felt better. He said he wished he had never started.

I told him that I was glad that he would see me, because he was said to be a woman-hater who avoided women altogether. He took that as a big joke and enjoyed it. He asked me if people didn't realize that he had always had female students. Then he told me that there was one woman he certainly would avoid—a crazy woman (I think he said American, but I am not sure) who wrote him letters all the time proposing marriage. He said he wouldn't even open her envelopes any more. He never mentioned the fact that he had lived about 33 years with Mrs. Moore and much of that time with her daughter—and that he was now already legally married to his American friend Joy Davidman.

The tea that Lewis ordered was served on the large low table before us—a platter full of breads and cookies and a big pot of tea and pitcher of milk, with cups and saucers and spoons and all. I know the British had a certain way of pouring the tea and milk simultaneously, but I was so new there that I didn't know how it was done. Lewis didn't give me an opening to admit that I would prefer to have him do it; he just asked me to serve and went on talking with me. I lifted the tea and held it aloft for a very long time while we talked on about various subjects. The pot of tea got heavier and heavier. To save myself I can't remember how I eventually poured it or how it should have been poured. But I clearly remember that on page eleven of *Out of the Silent Planet* Lewis wrote: "Ransom, who was very thirsty indeed by now, observed that his host was one of those irritating people who forget to use their hands when they begin talking." At the time he didn't show a flicker of irritation.

Lewis was extremely easy to talk with. We soon learned that we had something in common—a love for the surf. When he told me how much he enjoyed the surf in Ireland, I knew he would love it in Southern California. But he told me that he had no desire ever to come to the United States.

He didn't mention to me that he had done his share of skinny-dipping in his day, and I wouldn't have guessed it. By the time I met him he was 57 years old, bulky and balding with a large ruddy face, and didn't look like a swimmer at all. But he certainly looked full of fun.

I told him that I had read Chad Walsh's book about him and that I had encountered Chad Walsh about three weeks earlier at Wheaton College. He replied that he thought Walsh's book was poor. For example, Walsh accidentally stated that Lewis lived in a rambling 40-room home. Lewis laughed and told me that The Kilns was a small, modest house. He must have liked Chad Walsh more than he indicated to me, because four years later he dedicated his book *The Four Loves* to Walsh.

Lewis's latest book when I met him was *Till We Have Faces*. He told me that the publisher had refused to use his own choice for the title. He was still irritated about that. The title he had wanted to use was *Bareface*. He had finally suggested *Till We Have Faces* as a second choice, but he still thought *Bareface* was much better. (At this time Lewis was hoping for a good reception for this novel which he considered his finest imaginative work. Its poor reception in England shortly after our meeting was to be the biggest disappointment of his career.)

The book, of course, is the one he dedicated to Joy Davidman, a fact which he didn't mention to me. He had written it during their friendship. I have heard it said that this is the only novel in which a male author has used an ugly woman for his heroine. It is inevitable that some Lewis readers look for and find connections between that ugly heroine and Joy Davidman.

Lewis told me that *Till We Have Faces* would be his last book with his present publisher. He said it would be a difficult break to make, but he was determined to make it. His present publisher had been giving him a hard time for years, he said, referring to a difficult old man there who took advantage of his good nature. He made the martyrdom story dramatic and funny. By checking a Lewis bibliography you can quickly see that after our talk Lewis went right on letting the same company, Geoffrey Bles, publish most of his books for the rest of

his life after all. (Bles has recently been taken over by Collins.)

Lewis complained to me that *The Screwtape Letters* was greatly overrated. He said he didn't see why it should be so popular. He also told me that he was a terrible speller and had been all his life. Then he went on to discuss science fiction.

I remember that he recommended Arthur Clarke. I asked him if he had ever read any Ray Bradbury and he said no. A couple of years later I heard Bradbury speak and got to ask him afterward how he liked C. S. Lewis's space trilogy, and he said he had never heard of it. Now, however, I read in the Lewis biography a line that indicates that in 1956 he had in fact already sampled Bradbury. Perhaps he misunderstood my question or the name had slipped his mind. I suppose Bradbury really knew the Lewis trilogy also. I conclude that it doesn't always pay to ask questions.

In fact, I know it doesn't, because I had a burning question to ask Lewis. "How," I asked, "do you intend for your readers to pronounce the name Aslan?" All he would say was that he didn't care and that I should pronounce it however it seemed best to me.

The one piece of advice that I can recall that Lewis gave me besides urging me not to smoke was to read for pleasure. Now that I stop to think about it, I have obeyed him on both counts. It was probably when he waxed warm on the topic of pleasure-reading that, after a pithy statement or illustration of his, I exclaimed that that was just what he had written in such and such a book.

He pretended to be crestfallen and said, "That's the trouble with writing a book. Once people have read it, your conversation is not new to them!"

By the time we got up and left the Royal Oxford, Lewis had spent an hour and a quarter with me. The peculiar part is that he seemed to enjoy every minute of it. I had a Brownie camera with me and wanted to take his picture but was afraid that he might be offended if I asked, so I didn't. He shook my hand and headed for his bus. I walked down the street in a daze, looking at the hand that he had touched. That night I wrote to my friend John Lindskoog, "C. S. Lewis is the kindest man I have ever met—and his eyes twinkle." You really can't imagine how they twinkled.

**E**IGHT MONTHS AFTER my wonderful tea with Lewis, Joy was dying of cancer in the hospital and wanted to go home with Lewis and die as his wife. And so he married her in a Christian ceremony at her bedside. They could not get married in a church, but at least they were married in a place named Churchill Hospital. Jack took her home with him to die, and instead she began to get well!

During World War II some little girls had moved into The Kilns for awhile after being evacuated from London, and Lewis had despaired of them because they seemed unable to entertain themselves. He had no such problem when Joy moved in. As soon as she was well enough she delighted in running the household as Jack's bride.

Joy was 42 when Jack married her, and her sons were about the ages that the two Lewis boys had been when Flora died. After 50 years, Jack was finally living in a happy family again. His brother Warren was there to share in his pleasure. "See how I have dwindled into a husband," Jack liked to remark. The next couple of years were the happiest time of Lewis's life.

Not everyone liked the new Mrs. Lewis. J. R. R. Tolkien told Walter Hooper years later that it was characteristic of Lewis to be "taken in" by people—notably Mrs. Moore and Joy Davidman. Tolkien named a third person who had "taken in" Lewis: no less than Charles Williams!

Noting Tolkien's negative attitude toward Mrs. Lewis and Charles Williams, it amused me to learn of his negative attitude toward *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He said to Roger L. Green, "I hear you've been reading Jack's children's story. It really won't do, you know! I mean to say, 'Nymphs and their Ways, The Love-Life of a Faun.' Doesn't he know what he's talking about?" Tolkien might not have lived long enough to hear about the recent *London Times* poll in which British children voted for their favorite books, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* came in second only to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

At any rate, Tolkien and some other people did not care for Joy Lewis, but we have Lewis's entire book *A Grief Observed* to tell us how he finally felt about his wife. Unfortunately, the only words we have from Joy to tell us about Lewis as a husband were spoken on her deathbed. She said to him, "You have made me very happy." She died of cancer at 45, almost the same age Flora had been when she died of cancer 52 years earlier.

**W**HILE LEWIS AND JOY were enjoying their brief happiness in 1958, a new American woman came into his life—Mrs. Caroline Rakestraw of the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation of Atlanta, Georgia. She arrived in London to supervise

the recording of his lectures on "the four loves" for American radio. Her comment on his recording session was, "His personality filled the room."

According to Carolyn Keefe's book, Mrs. Rakestraw took it upon herself to snip out and discard parts of the tape about Eros because she considered it shocking. According to the Hooper biography, some American bishops considered the Eros material objectionable even after Mrs. Rakestraw's editing, and made sure that it was not widely broadcast in the United States. Now that there is such a demand for Lewis material here, they are selling the set of lectures on four cassette tapes for \$40 a set.

For one reason or another, Lewis always called Mrs. Rakestraw "Mrs. Cartwheel." Lewis claimed to Walter Hooper that Mrs. Rakestraw said to him, "Professor Lewis, I'm afraid you brought sex into your talks on Eros," and Lewis replied, "My dear Mrs. Cartwheel, how can you talk about Eros and *leave it out?*"

Mrs. Rakestraw was then and still is the executive director of the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation. That is the same group that is now making an animated TV film of the *Chronicles of Narnia* and has turned the film over to artist John Hubble, the creator of Mr. Magoo. The Foundation has already accepted his handsome drawing of Aslan and his peculiar depiction of the Narnian children in mod hairstyles and bell bottom trousers. I wrote to Walter Hooper about this illustration and learned that he too detests it and hopes for a change. When I look at these Second World War children from London dressed in their floppy 1974 unisex costumes, I want to call out, "Mrs. Cartwheel and your conservative bishops, where are you now that we need you?" Surely a pop version of Narnia is more harmful than any number of scholarly Christian lectures on Eros.

Anyway, Lewis made a book out of his lectures on love and published it in 1960, the year Joy died. The excellent Hooper and Green biography claims that he lost his creativity when she died. That is a pleasantly tragic idea, but I can't see how the facts support it. Although he was in extremely poor health himself, he finished three more excellent books before he died in 1963.

Incidentally, Corbin Scott Carnell makes a more far-fetched claim in his attractive new book about Lewis, *Bright Shadow of Reality*. He says that after Charles Williams died in 1945 there was a gap in Lewis's productivity for more than ten years—from 1945 to the late 1950's! Take a look at the list of Lewis books that came out during that supposed gap. In my own opinion the only death that cut off C. S. Lewis's creativity was his own, and I cannot be at all sure of that!

**I**N LEWIS'S LAST YEARS he became friends with the poet Kathleen Raine who was doing research on William Blake at Cambridge. She met Lewis at a dinner party and did not expect to like him very much because she had only read *The Problem of Pain* and *The Screwtape Letters* and did not care for them. But her reaction was, "To meet him was to know that here was a man of great learning continuously kindled into life by imagination. He seemed to possess a kind of boyish greatness." She had tea with him in his rooms at Cambridge occasionally before he had to retire, and she says, "Every conversation was an exploration, or a game with a shining ball flying through the air." She became a devoted lover of the Narnian chronicles.

**T**HE VERY LAST WOMAN to meet C. S. Lewis was Kaye Webb, an editor of Puffin Books. She went to the Kilns two days before he died to make plans about their paperback edition of the Narnian chronicles. ... Kaye Webb's reaction to C. S. Lewis was, "What a great and dear man. How I wish I'd had a chance to know him well..."

Shortly before Kaye Webb met him, Lewis said that he hoped that in heaven he would find that Spencer had written another six books of *The Faerie Queen* for him to read there and that Rider Haggard had written a trilogy of romances about the Wandering Jew. Along that line, some of us might wish that in heaven we will find seven more chronicles of Narnia or perhaps the strange romance about Helen of Troy which Lewis couldn't finish here because of his failing health.

But a woman in Canada had a more ambitious idea about heaven than reading Lewis books there. Her friend Dr. Overton Stephens, author of *Today Is All You Have*, was dying of cancer when she left for the summer three or four years ago. When she came home and found to her surprise that he was still alive, she said joyfully, "Oh, I'm so glad! I want you to make an appointment for me to see C. S. Lewis in heaven." Dr. Stephens laughingly agreed to do what he could about it, and he was very soon on his way. I say, "Good luck" to the woman.

I have told you a bit about a few of the many women who personally encountered Lewis during his lifetime. From my own experience, I believe that being with Lewis was even better than reading his books. Being with him was a bit of heaven, and I sincerely hope that heaven will include a bit of being with him.