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Origin of the Name 'Narnia'

Abstract

Contents that the origin of the name "Narnia" is to be found in classical Latin literature, where it is a place-name for an area about 50 miles from Rome.

Additional Keywords

Lisa Cowan

to the tradition of Christian transcendentalism in English poetry--the great tradition of Spenser, Vaughan, the later Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Coventry Patmore³ and adds that Williams' "outlines of Romantic Theology" aroused doubts like those leading to Patmore's suppression of *Sponsa Dei*, an unpublished work discussing mystical theology in terms of nuptial imagery. Williams' early poems, as a glance down the list of title in *Poems of Conformity* (1917), *Divorce* (1920), *Windows of Night* (1925) will show, are more churchly than erotic.

For Williams the fullest earthly realization or model of community seems consistently throughout his writing life to be Church, not necessarily triumphant, but potential, under attack, falling short it may be, though always striving for order and dependent upon mutual self-giving. His ecclesiology is of a Church *in via*, Church as people, whose ritual truly expresses their approach to the truly transcendent.

¹ See his *Patmore: A Study in Poetry* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1933).

² Page also edited Coventry Patmore, *Courage in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Oxford, 1921). The original of this letter is in Boston College Library's Patmore collection.

³ *British Book News Supplement*, #63 (1955), p. 15.



ORIGIN OF THE NAME "NARNIA"

ALBERT A. BELL, JR.

One of the most satisfying things about the Chronicles of Narnia is that the names fit so well with the mood and characters of the story. The bumbling giant Wimbleweather, the audacious mouse Reepicheep, the gentle faun Tumnus, the sinister Fenris Ulf, and all the rest seem made for their names or their names made especially for them. Even the name "Narnia" itself has a liltng, other-worldly quality about it, as is appropriate for this other world, which is simply somewhere else. Where did Lewis get the name? Charles A. Brady, some twenty years ago, theorized that "the name seems to echo both Angria and Norns."¹ But, as Marjorie E. Wright was the first to recognize², the name "Narnia" is actually taken from the ancient Latin literature which Lewis had studied since childhood and which he loved so deeply. This fact, however, does not seem to have become widely known. Clyde Kilby refers to Wright's observation in a footnote³, but Lewis' use of Latin literature as a source deserves more attention, for he draws from authors other than Livy (the only one mentioned by Wright) and he draws more than just the word "Narnia" from these ancient writers.

Lewis' familiarity with classical literature is apparent to anyone who even glances at *Till We Have Faces*, a retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche found in the second-century Latin writer Apuleius. But his study of Latin was lifelong. He tells us in *Surprised by Joy* that he began studying the language at home with his mother, who died when he was about nine. He continued his work in school and at Malvern "rapidly found my feet in Latin and English" (p. 58). He won a classical scholarship to Malvern College in 1913 and in 1917 entered University College, Oxford, in classics.

He admits in *Surprised by Joy* (p. 144) that he reached his late fifties "without ever reading one word of Caesar," but his acquaintance with the other major Latin writers is obvious. On pp. 38-39 of *Joy*, for example, he alludes to Cicero and Martial. The references to Martial is of particular interest because in one of his poems Martial talks about

"Narnia, girded by a stream, white with its sulphurous eddies, thou whose twin peaks are scarce to be scaled" (7.93). This description is especially noteworthy because in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the White Witch tells Edmund he can find her castle "between those two hills."

Other references to Narnia (modern Narni, about fifty miles north of Rome) appear in the works of Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 3.113; 31.51), Pliny the Younger (*Epistles* 1.4), Tacitus *Annals* 3.9, and Livy 10.10; 27.9; 27.50; 29.15). The last three passages in Livy occur in the narrative of Hannibal's war against Rome, a section which British schoolboys of Lewis' generation knew all too well. In 27.50 Livy describes "two horsemen from Narnia, who had taken part in the battle," a phrase which sounds like something straight out of the Chronicles.

It does not diminish Lewis' achievement to call attention to the origin of the name of one of his finest works. It simply makes us aware of the man's erudition. Lewis was indeed a well-read, even a bookish, man. It was inevitable that things he had read and perhaps consciously forgotten should find their way from his subconscious through his pen into his stories. The fact that the name "Narnia" has taken on a new meaning and existence which totally eclipses its origin is a measure of Lewis' genius.

FOOTNOTES

¹ "Finding God in Narnia," *America* 96 (Oct. 27, 1956), 104.

² "The Cosmic Kingdom of Myth: A Study in the Myth-Philosophy of Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien" (Ph. D. dissertation, Univ. of Illinois, 1960), p. 153.

³ *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 121n.