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C.S. Lewis and the Toponym Narnia

Abstract

Argues a possible derivation of the name *Narnia* from Old and Middle Irish sources; concludes Lewis was not likely aware of these Irish names, but Narnia was influenced by Lewis's experience of Ireland.

Additional Keywords

Ireland; Lewis, C.S.—Settings—Narnia—Geography; Lewis, C.S.—Settings—Narnia—Names; Lewis, C.S.—Settings—Narnia—Sources

C. S. Lewis and The Toponym Narnia

William Sayers

In an earlier number of this journal, Albert A. Bell, Jr. proposes a plausible source for the name of C. S. Lewis's imaginary kingdom, Narnia.¹ Bell, like others before and after him, refers *Narnia* to the Umbrian city of the same name, present-day Narni, some fifty miles north of Rome.² He suggests that Lewis could have remembered the name from his school and university readings in Latin (Martial, Pliny the Elder, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus or Livy), recalls Lewis's original enrollment in classics at Oxford, and proposes that the euphony of *Narnia* (its "lilting, otherworldly quality ... as is appropriate for this other world, which is simply somewhere else") guaranteed it a place in Lewis' auditory memory and cleared the way for its later almost involuntary use ("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").

But identifying an otherworldly quality in the toponym *Narnia* seems to me a *post factum* judgment based on its subsequent use in the *Chronicles* of that name, and, phonology and possible affective value aside, a reference to the Italic city is quite lacking in thematic resonance for the work in question and even -- although this risks sharing Bell's reasoning -- is, for Lewis's purposes, not Otherworldly enough by virtue of its very real past historical existence. With the young Lewis brothers capable of rechristening their father *P'dayta-Pie*, we could with greater justification propose that the name *Narnia* was a reduplicative form of **Warnia*, a kingdom proper to Warnie, Lewis's elder brother Warren and fellow adventurer in the fantasy world that was entered through the Little End Room.³ But I propose for consideration as origin for the placename *Narnia* a source that was both domestic and foreign, one that lay in that other Ireland from which the Protestants of Belfast had a ready shield in language.

In Old and Middle Irish *nairne* meant a "night watch, vision" and, apparently by extension, an "expedition, adventure" or "tale of adventure." Under a variant or related form, the word is perhaps best known to students of early Celtic literature today in the traditional title of the tale *Airne Fíngéin*, the "Night-Watch" or "Vision of Fíngen," from the Cycle of the Kings.⁴ Its messianic theme, the coming of the true ruler, makes it of interest to summarize briefly, even if the questions of whether and how Lewis might have known of the tale must be briefly deferred. The tribal king Fíngen mac Luchta was accustomed each Samain (Eve of November 1 and start of a new year) to receive the visit of an Otherworld woman, Rothnian, who would announce to him all the singular events to take place in Ireland in the coming year. But for the year that

saw the birth of the hero and future king Conn Cétchathach ("Conn of the hundred battles"), the revelations of prodigies signaled not only the future prosperity of Ireland but also the death of Fíngen himself in Conn's service. The next major portion of the tale is taken up with the account of each of twelve marvelous events, characterized as *búada* "victories, triumphs, successes," appropriate markers of the birth of the glorious future ruler. Several of the wonders are centered on Tara, with its supposedly royal mounds, according preeminence to the site that will be Conn's seat. In other traditional Irish matter the name *Nairne* (variants *Narne*, *Nairniu*) is also used of Tara or one of the mounds there. Fíngen refuses to accede to the predictive truth of the vision and opposes Conn's efforts to assume the kingship; yet later he dies in Conn's interests. In the remainder of the tale, the focus passes from Fíngen to Conn.

While hardly evidence that will stand up to close scrutiny, maps of Narnia that have been derived by readers and editors from the *Chronicles* center the kingdom on a configuration of rivers and valleys very reminiscent of the valleys of the Boyne and its tributaries, with Lewis's Cair Paravel in the relative position of Drogheda. Entertaining this fiction for a further moment, Aslan's How would then coincide with the site of Mellifont Abbey -- and the city of Tashbaan in Calormen with Dublin! The Hill of Tara, south of present day Navan, would then also fall within the boundaries of Old Narnia. A similar, more psychological than topographical, case could be made for a siting of Narnia in southwestern Ulster (see below). If we may trust Hooper, Lewis's favorite landscape was the heights of the Carlingford Mountains, with Warrenpoint, Rostrevor and the Mountains of Mourne as important points of references.⁵

An alternate Irish origin for *Narnia* might be sought in the adjective *nár* "noble, magnanimous, honourable" and "modest," all suitable epithets for an ideal kingdom, but particularly meaningful in the context of Lewis's moralizing work and his portrayal of Narnia at its best. The adjective was characteristically used of legendary heroes and kings, including Cú Chulainn and Conn, and, in the expression *nim nár*, even of heaven.

But at this point we must stop and ask how Lewis could possibly have come into contact with the tale *Airne Fíngéin* or words such as *nairne* or *nár*, and their complex of associations. While Lewis may well have read Martial at school and later, he did not attend a Christian Brothers school or study Irish as did, briefly and regretfully, James Joyce, a fact suppressed in the latter's autobiographical references but richly apparent in his wealth of allusions, only lately

recognized, to Celtic matters, story-telling, and mythology.⁶ And whatever hatred Lewis may initially have had of England when sent there to school, a hatred that reinforced Ireland as home, his adolescent and adult professional years were spent there.

Yet Lewis knew his English-language Irish authors well, and he has left an intriguing description of a meeting with Yeats. Another avenue for contact with native Irish material, albeit in English, was in Lewis's reading of the work of the Dubliner (and later friend of Joyce) James Stephens, on whom Lewis gave a public lecture. In works like *Irish Fairy Tales*, *The Crock of Gold*, *Deirdre*, *The Demi-Gods*, and *The Hill of Vision*, Stephens relayed traditional Irish story-telling matter from the medieval period, treating of the divinities Angus Óg, the Dagda, the heroes and the knowledge-seekers Fionn, Oisín, Tuan mac Cairill, Mongán, kings such as Conchobar and Conn, but he also wrote of the youngsters of nearcontemporary rural Ireland who encounter the supernatural. In particular, Caitlín Ní Murrachu's adventure with the philosophizing god Angus Óg bears comparison with the Narnia travellers' dealings with Aslan. Lewis writes in his diary that he had read the first three of these titles and in particular *The Crock of Gold* was to figure in several documented conversations with Oxford colleagues.⁷ In general Lewis gives evidence of more than just a passing concern for Irish and Hiberno-English literature. In a letter from 1930 to his boyhood friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis comments on Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* and goes on to characterize the Celtic story-telling spirit as

sensuous ... less homely [than Germanic] ... lacking in reverence ... transparent and full of nuances evanescent -- but very bright. One sees that Celtic is essentially pagan, frivolous under all its melancholy, incapable of growing into a religion, and -- I think -- a little heartless.⁸

Such a nuanced judgment represents more than just casual acquaintanceship. Other Inklings were also interested in Celtic matters and Lewis' definition seems an apt one to apply, for example, to the elves of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.⁹ Lewis' Narnia will be a more moral kingdom, both in its awareness of morality (the implicit criticism of Celtic being that it was amoral) and in its moral stature, as embodied in Aslan.

But against such attractive points of contact with traditional Irish narrative, which was becoming available through translations and adaptations in the early decades of the century in the work of both scholars like O'Grady, Stokes, and Meyer, and popular writers like Hyde, Lady Gregory, Yeats, Stephens and others, we must weigh the facts of the relative rarity of *airne/nairne* even in Old and Middle Irish, and its absence from, for example, the work of later writers in English.¹⁰ Another avenue for contact with Celtic story-telling that is briefly worth consideration but must on reflection also be closed is the professorship of Celtic at Jesus College, Oxford. The incumbent from 1921

to 1945 was John Fraser but there is no record of any sustained friendship with Lewis, and Fraser, although trained like Lewis in classics, was primarily interested in philology and Scots Gaelic.¹¹

To summarize our findings to date, we must accept as unlikely that even the coincidental parallel between Lewis' *Narnia* and OIr *nairne* was known to the author. While Joyce would have viewed as significant the discovery that an important toponym from his work had prestigious antecedents in early Irish legendary history (although the subjective significance of such correspondences for him is still difficult to plumb), we can only speculate on what Lewis' reaction might have been under similar circumstances.¹²

As in one popular medieval mnemonic system (adapted in Eco's *Name of the Rose*), the conception of Narnia is reached in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* through a succession of rooms: one with medieval armour, one hung in green and containing a harp, then a series of book-lined rooms, and finally the spare room, empty but for its mirrored wardrobe. These, for present purposes, might be given the epithets: chivalric, Celtic, scholarly, and liminal. As in much of Celtic story-telling, the entry into the Otherworld is through an innocuous plane: a face of rock, the sea's surface, here a hinged mirror. In the novel the young explorers' last sight is a reflection of themselves, perhaps indicative of their need to pass beyond their prior existences.

It may not be in the Ireland of ancient heroes and kings but in *Mother Ireland* (to borrow Edna O'Brien's title) that we must seek Narnia's essential origins, although in this we leave onomastics for psychology, but not for surer ground. Lewis's mother Florence died in 1908 when Jack (seldom called Clive) was nine years of age. He was shortly thereafter sent to school in England and this marked the beginning of the cooling of his relationship with his father. It also put an end to the fantasies of the Little End Room. Several voids then opened simultaneously in Lewis's life. Later, Lewis would become first foster-son then lover of Janie Moore ("Minto"), an evolving set of personal responsibilities that the author is widely credited with bearing well, although there can be little doubt that these were burdensome when the original age disparity of some 25 years was no longer that between the young man of 19 and the woman of 45. When Lewis was all but free of these obligations, in 1948 or 1949, he returned to the draft of the first volume of what would become *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The series would be completed by 1953, and the writing would have covered the period of Mrs. Moore's last years, her residence in a nursing home, and her death in 1951. In Narnia perhaps the later, most onerous side of Lewis' surrogate mother appears as the White Witch.¹³

By this time Lewis' father was also long dead, thus in a sense "freeing Ireland" of the object of his bad conscience. Once the Narnia stories began, Lewis' Christian apologetic writing ceased, in a radical change of mode, if not of ultimate purpose.

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collection of passages from Lewis, oddly enough only quotes from Lewis once in this book. The quotation is from "Christianity and Literature," the last essay in *Rehabitations and Other Essays*, and it is not about Christian literature, but an anti-aesthete position of Lewis', indicating "all the greatest poems have been made by men who valued something else much more than poetry" (*Rehabitations* 196). Walsh is discussing *The Book of Acts* in the chapter in which he uses this quotation. [JRC]

Welch, Robert, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. Oxford Clarendon Press, 1996. [Lewis 309-310.]

The unattributed biographical write-up of Lewis is occasionally inaccurate but sometimes interesting in its Irish emphases: it says that *Spirits in Bondage* reflected the Irish literary revival, particularly the influence of Yeats; it claims that Merlin in *That Hideous Strength* is based on Yeats (probably a mistake for the Magician in *Dymer*, which work is not mentioned); it suggests the Narnian otherworld reflects Irish myth and a continuing influence of Yeats (neither especially obvious, it may be said); it mentions his brother William (a mistake for Warren). The sources given at the end are inadequate, but the citation of Terence Brown's "C. S. Lewis: Irishman?" in *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (1988) is valuable as a not-well-known discussion. [JRC]



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Narnia itself, while no matriarchy, does appear that fertile and potentially pacific land which is both the nurturing maternal environment of early childhood and the ideal kingdom of early Irish narrative, where the just king ruled in harmony with divine power through his *hieros gamos* with the goddess of territorial sovereignty, the loathly lady who transforms herself into a fresh young beauty before the chosen candidate. Here it is again appropriate to recall how closely the landscape of Narnia approximates that of Lewis' preferred part of Ireland, the Carlingford Mountains, the Mountains of Mourne, Warrenpoint, and Rostrevor, and how easily this world, on the border of that "Other Ireland" (the Republic), could be reached from Belfast, just as Narnia seems both domestic and foreign to its young immigrants, initiates and converts. Even if we must, on balance, return to Italic Narnia and Lewis' wide reading for the origins of the name of his fantasy kingdom,

from this most personal perspective sketched above, Narnia, the kingdom if not the name, clearly has an Irish cast, and its means of access (the door) has well known Irish antecedents. Narnia is a distillate of Lewis's early years and best later experiences in Ireland, and may well in part reflect his reading of and talking about James Stephens' youthful heroes and heroines, sympathetic animals, and wonder-filled evocation of the Irish landscape and of the imminence of the supernatural. Perhaps after all OIr *nairne* 'night watch, vision; expedition, adventure; tale of adventure' is not too inadequate a descriptor for *The Chronicles of Narnia*. ☞

Notes

1. Albert A. Bell, Jr., "Origin of the name 'Narnia'," *Mythlore* 7:2 (1980), 29. Bell reviews earlier comment on the origin of the name, e.g., *Angria plus Noms*, and the first airing of the present conjecture.
2. More scholarly treatment of the possible adaptation and source is found in Paul F. Ford's *Companion to Narnia* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), s.n. Narnia, pp. 208f.
3. In line with the proposal to follow, one might also entertain the notion of changes rung on *Hibernia* or *Erinor Irish Ériu*, gen. *Érenn*.
4. *Airne Fingein*, ed. Joseph Vendryes, *Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series* 15 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1953).
5. *They Stand Together*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1979), p. 74.
6. For Joyce's appreciation and utilization of native Irish material, see Maria Tymoczko, *The Irish Ulysses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and her earlier "Sovereignty Structures in Ulysses," *James Joyce Quarterly* 25:4 (1988), 445-64, and "Symbolic Structures in Ulysses from Early Irish Literature," *JJQ* 21:3 (1984), 215-30.
7. From 1922 he writes: "I also read the greater part of James Stephens' *Irish Fairy Tales*: his curious humour and profundity of course peep out in places -- but the author of *The Crock of Gold* is simply wasted on other people's tales. Beyond these two I read nothing" (*All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis 1922-1927*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), p. 105. Further references to *The Crock of Gold* and his discussions about it with colleagues at Oxford on pp. 288, 303, 328. In an entry from the following year he notes having read *Deirdre* (p. 279).
8. Hooper, p. 374; Lewis makes a comparable judgment, not of Celtic literature but of the High Fairies, in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, repr. 1964), p. 130, writing of their "hard, bright and vividly material splendor."
9. See, for a rather cursory treatment, Nancy-Lou Patterson, "Bright-Eyed Beauty: Celtic Elements in Charles Williams, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis," *Mythlore* 10: 1 (1983), 5-10.
10. Lewis is unlikely to have come across the translation of *Airne Fingein* published by Tom P. Cross and A. C. L. Brown as "Fingen's Night-watch: Airne Fingein," *Romantic Review* 9 (1918), 2947, and the accompanying discussion does not, in any case, point up the correspondence *airne/nairne*.
11. A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), pp. 98f., states that there was no one capable of teaching medieval Welsh at Oxford when Lewis was a student there. This may well be too categorical a statement, but I have not looked into Fraser's teaching activities.
12. Joyce, for example, was ready to turn his unfinished *Finnegans Wake* over to Stephens for completion not, apparently, on the basis of his appreciation of Stephens's writing, but for their assumed coincidental dates of birth, names (real and fictional), the derived monogram JJ & S that was also used of John Jameson and Son's whiskey, etc.
13. For a less sympathetic view of Lewis's creation, see David Holbrook, *The Skeleton in the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis's Fantasies* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991).