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Reviews

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Reviews

Abstract

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C.S. Lewis: The Man and His God. Richard Harries. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

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The Screwtape Letters. C.S. Lewis. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.



REVIEWS

A Music of Meaning

Madeleine L'Engle, *A Cry Like a Bell* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1987), 110 pp. ISBN 0-87788-148-0.

One of the few twentieth century writers of devotional works, novels, and major children's fantasies whose works can really be included in the same breath with C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams, Madeleine L'Engle is, like them, also a poet. The seventy poems contains in this volume record, as the title suggests, cries from the heart of humankind -- Eve, Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Esau, Rachel, Leah, Jacob, Pharaoh, Moses, Gershom, Naasman, David, Mary, Andrew, Mary Magdalene, Simon of Cyrene, Barabbas, Salome, Thomas, Peter, Barnabas, Phoebe, Priscilla -- intoning a litany of mingled pain and faith. Even the bleating of "The ram; caught in a bush" and the braying of "Balaam's ass" are joined in the chorus. It is one long lament, one long prayer for light. It is also one of the most honest religious books ever written. And it is not a book to be taken lightly; it has been my companion over a whole series of early morning devotions, not gobbled at one reading but savoured, bitter-sweet as the little book which St. John ate in *Revelation*, from meditation to meditation.

Readers of *Mythlore* will of course be familiar with the poetic voices of Tolkien, Williams and Lewis: L'Engle's voice most resembles that of Lewis, not because of her form but because of her tone: hers is a music of meaning; an example is "Priscilla's response to the letter of the Hebrews." The verses are arranged in two vertical columns like the thesis and antithesis of an argument; veering from "He is" to "He is not," while the synthesis, the essence of God's being, builds in the mind of the reader. Another is "O wise and foolish virgins," in which the birth of Cain to Eve and the birth of Jesus to Mary are compared: the voices of the virgins close the poem:

Now we await the final birth.
The oil has spilled. No one is wise.
The galaxies and out small earth
labour in pain at time's demise.
Like her, I call,
Come, Lord of all!

This profoundly contemplative book contains no easy answers. Rather, it asks the ageless question,

those which cut more deeply today than ever before.

-- Nancy-Lou Patterson

Not A Tame Lion?

Richard Harries, *C.S. Lewis: The Man and His God* (Glasgow: Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1987) 93 pp. ISBN 0-00-627143-X.

Expanded and "rewritten in places" from a series of "six talks on C.S. Lewis on BBC Radio 4," this book is a brief evaluation and critique of certain elements in Lewis' theology as Richard Harries, now Bishop of Oxford, understands it. I should say at the outset that this is a much more humane and thought-provoking book than John Beversluis' regrettable *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, although it too depends very heavily upon the insights from the abyss which are recorded (or in George Mussacchio's view, presented) in *A Grief Observed*. Readers very familiar with Lewis will note that only one quotation from the mythopoetic cycles appears: the resurrection romp in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and will understand the strong possibility of a skew in any interpretation of Lewis confined with this exception to his apologetic works. The books examined are *Surprised by Joy*, *A Grief Observed*, "The Weight of Glory," *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *67 The Great Divorce*, the Introduction to *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, *Poems, God in the Dock*, *Fern-Seed and Elephants*, *Christian Reflections*, *The Four Loves*, and *Letters to Malcolm*. It is Lewis' last book, the last-named above, which Bishop Harries (quite rightly) praises. Indeed, in all of these works he finds elements to praise, but he disagrees on certain major theological points, raising questions well worth discussing. I will mention them below but would point out again that without the mythopoetic works one does not by any means have the complete mind of Lewis, let alone his complete theology.

Bishop Harries' first objection is to Lewis' statement, made about God in *The Problem of Pain*, that "He demands our worship, our obedience, our prostration." (Quoted on p. 31) To this, he responds that "God does not demand our worship. He is simply there, like a mountain range permanently on the horizon, to be recognized--" (p. 32) Further, he suggests that Lewis "see[s] suffering as issuing from the hand of God" (based on *A Grief Observed*). The God in that book, Bishop Harries

says, "is not a God to whom we can give moral assent." (p. 34)

The second objection is to Lewis' use of the figure of "the Devil": Bishop Harries opposes this classical demonology by arguing from within that demonology. But chiefly he objects because "it seems morally intolerable to have hordes of spirits hovering about leading us into sin." (p. 38) He concludes that "it is necessary to reject the idea not only of one devil but of all devils." (p. 39) The problems arise instead within the human psyche, in the case of "moral evil," and within the "whole of our environment [which] has this regular, fixed predictable character," in the case of "natural evils." (p. 46) He recommends to us his own favorite theologian, Austin Farrar's *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, a "difficult book but one with a touch of genius about it," (p. 53) as a corrective, and concludes that "accident and tragedy... are contrary to God's will of love for us," and that "he invites us to co-operate with him in remedying them." (p. 54)

After touching upon the role of myth and prayer in Lewis' thought, Bishop Harries proceeds to his third objection. Lewis, he says, believed that "There is no need in God himself" for human love. (p. 76) No so: God "invites us to co-operate with him in the achievement of His purpose: he wants our positive response; he can be hurt as he can be made glad."

In his concluding chapter, "Eternal Glory," Bishop Harries discusses the afterlife, which for him is the answer to the problems of evil and pain. It is here that he turns to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to answer the question, "how can we believe that the one in whom Jesus trusted really is a loving father?" (p. 82) The reply is the scene of the resurrected Aslan's romp with Lucy and Susan: as Bishop Harries puts it, it is Christ raised from the dead [which is] the decisive sign of God's goodwill towards us."

In the short space of a review I cannot undertake to answer, either by concurrence or argument, Bishop Harries' objections to Lewis. But I am intrigued by his comment in a footnote that Austin Farrar "was a more sensitive spirit than Lewis and had an even more subtle mind. Perhaps for these reasons he has not reached Lewis' public." (p. 92) I think that Lewis' public has been reached not so much by his demanding God and his intolerable demonology, as by his evocations of the supernatural, not least in the figure of Aslan, who, while not a tame lion (and hence not like Bishop Harries' God), is prepared to romp forever with His followers "with his paws beautifully velveteed."

-- Nancy-Lou Patterson

Kay and Jack

Kathryn Lindskoog, *C.S. Lewis, Mere Christian* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1987), 260 pp. ISBN 0-87788-543-5

Although it contains substantially the same text

as that of the "revised and expanded" version published in 1981 by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (a version vastly expanded and improved over its original form of 1973), this handsome paperback version does contain significant additions and changes, especially in the already remarkably fine Appendices (pp. 229-245). These materials are brought essentially up to date in content and detail. The annotated chronological listing of C.S. Lewis' books is substantially extended, the comments about the works are interestingly revised, and some intriguing questions are raised. These questions can be summarized as follows: are all of the contents of the ever-lengthening list of works attributed to Lewis correctly included in what might be called the "canonical" writings?

The text of C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christian*, is a very good, clear, well-presented, appealingly written, and genuinely useful study of what Lewis wrote about God, Nature, Humanity, Death, Heaven, Hell, Miracles, Prayer, Pain, Love, Ethics, Truth, Sciences, the Arts, and Education. A chapter is directed to each of these subjects and each chapter is assigned a well-chosen and excellent bibliography of his writings on that subject. When he read Kathryn Lindskoog's early study (a thesis) on his work, C.S. Lewis wrote to her, "You know my work better than anyone else I have met." It is now more than thirty years since Kay had tea with Jack, but his judgement still stands.

-- Nancy-Lou Patterson

Screwtape Strikes Again

C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Introduction by Richard Gilman (New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1988). 134 pp. ISBN 0-451-62610-9

I would imagine that a reader looking for a copy of *The Screwtape Letters* to tuck in a pocket for easy reference, would be glad to see an edition like this; it contains the original version of 1941 with all of its topical references (and their necessary touch, in a fantasy, of verisimilitude), as well as all its endless freshness, its originality, its capacity to touch the quick. Interestingly, it appears in a series entitled "The Best of Britain," along with *Moll Flanders*, *Silas Marner*, and *Oliver Twist*. In other words, it has become a "classic work," pace those who have wondered if Lewis' apologetic works might become *passé*.

In his introduction, Richard Gilman, a Roman Catholic who is author of five books including a "spiritual autobiography," praises "Lewis's accounts and exegeses of Christian belief and doctrine" for the "logical nature of his arguments," (p. vii) which may come as a shock to certain quarters. He compares Lewis' methods to Chesterton's and Bernard Shaw's for his use of "paradox, irony, and reversal as rhetorical instruments to throw light on what was conventionally opaque or denatured by familiarity." This is true in the 1980's with our renewed interest in rhetoric as in the 1940's when a writer was still expected to be logical.

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Foster, Robert. *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth*. New York: Ballantine, 1978. An invaluable reference work, meticulous and comprehensive.

Krupp, Edwin C., ed. *In Search of Ancient Astronomies*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979. A series of essays that serve as an introduction to archaeoastronomy. The opinion of the essayists on the astronomical ability of the ancients is very high, on the theories of Velikovsky and Von Daniken snake-belly low.

Lockyer, J. Norman. *The Dawn of Astronomy: A Study of the Temple-Worship and Mythology of the Ancient Egyptians*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1894. Would very likely have been known to Tolkien. Lockyer also did some of the early archaeoastronomical work on Stonehenge.

Marsden, Brian G. "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Truth About Lucan." *Seven* Volume 8 (1987), pgs. 85-96.

Meeus, Jean. *Astronomical Tables of the Sun, Moon, and Planets*. Richmond, VA: Willmann-Bell. Very detailed.

Michels, Agnes Kirsopp. *The Calendar of the Roman Republic*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967. Technical, specialist scholarly work. Good to demonstrate how easy it isn't to design and implement a calendar in the real world. Also good for a laugh or two at the Romans' expense, if you have a weird sense of humor like mine.

Neugebauer, O. *Vistas in Astronomy, Vol. One*. Arthur, Beer, ed. New York: Pergamon Press. Archaeoastronomy, especially Egyptian.

O'Neill, William Matthew. *Time and the Calendars*. Sydney, Australia: Sydney University Press, 1975. Most valuable discussion of the nature of calendars in general, elucidation of the relevant astronomical concepts, and description of major ancient and modern calendars.

Parise, Frank, ed. *The Book of Calendars*. New York: Facts on File, 1982. Covers more ground than above, contains a lot of tabular material. Some information, even by my cursory examination, is inaccurate (i.e. self-contradictory).

Sandow, Stuart A. *Durations*. New York: Times Books, 1977. For the exact length of the year.

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *The Hobbit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966. Page numbers refer to the hardbound edition (34th printing).

-----, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Referred to by letter number and page.

-----, *The Lord of the Rings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, Collector's Edition. This is the one-volume version with the "Note on the Text" by Douglas A. Anderson. References are by volume in Roman numerals (a curious holdover from the classic three-volume format, but still useful) and page.

-----, *The Lost Road*, Christopher Tolkien, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. Volume V in the ongoing series on the history of the writing of Tolkien's fiction.

-----, *The Silmarillion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

-----, "The Awakening of the Quendi", unpublished ms. known at this point only from notes taken by Dr. Clyde S. Kilby in 1966. Dr. Kilby

gave the author copies of these notes for analysis.

Christopher Tolkien has confirmed the authenticity of the ms. in a letter to the author, referring to it as "an Elvish fairy tale"(!), but Mr. Taum Santoski reports to me in mid-1988 that Christopher Tolkien has not yet located the ms. in his father's papers.

It is important to note that the citation by Dr. Kilby in his notes of the passage quoted indicates that he is summarizing, and not quoting verbatim. There is no doubt whatsoever, though, that the substance of his report is correct.

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The book, for those who, nearly half a century after it was written, have never read it, contains 31 purported letters from the senior devil Screw-tape to the junior tempter Wormwood, on the proper way to tempt his "patient," and ordinary young Englishman in the darkest hours of World War II. Screw-tape's infernal advice is always the exact reversal of Christian teaching; he sees everything upside down and inside-out. This, far from being a mere device, becomes more and more penetrating as the book progresses, to the point where (dare I give away the plot?) the patient is saved. (Read it for yourself to find out how!)

Poor Screw-tape: he concludes his arguments in *The Screw-tape Letters* by lamenting, "All that sustains me is the conviction that our Realism, our rejection (in the face of all temptations) of all silly nonsense and claptrap, must win in the end." Not while new editions of Lewis' trenchant masterpiece come readily to hand!

-- Nancy-Lou Patterson

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