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Reviews

Nancy-Lou Patterson

Kathryn Lindskoog

Glen GoodKnight

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Reviews

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Letters to Lalage: the Letters of Charles Williams to Lois Lang-Sims. Lois Lang-Sims. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

Letters to Lalage: the Letters of Charles Williams to Lois Lang-Sims. Lois Lang-Sims. Reviewed by Glen GoodKnight.

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REVIEWS



A Taste for Lewis

A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* London: Collins, 1990, 334 pp. ISBN 0-00-215137-5; New York: W.W. Norton, 1990, 334 pp. ISBN 0-393-02813-5.

According to the author of this lively and controversial biography, "a taste for Lewis is, in large part, a taste for reading about him." (p. 290) Why? Because "he shares with 'the last Romantics' a vivid awareness of his own consciousness," (p. 290) and is in fact "a Romantic egoist in the tradition of Wordsworth and Yeats." (p. 291) Lewis, Wilson assures us, was, just as he said of himself, "a sinful man," and what is more there is "unmistakable and remarkable evidence of something like sanctification which occurred in him towards the end of his days." (p. 292) Many a saint, Wilson is suggesting began as a sinner.

Wilson writes from a Christian, indeed, an Anglican stance. He is the author not only of distinguished biographies of Belloc, Milton, Scott, and Tolstoy (which distinction does not save him from shoddy, inaccurate, because of inadequately researched details, as for instance much of what he says about Charles Williams), but of a significant little volume of Christian apologetics (you know, like those little volumes of Lewis' that seemed to unsuitable to his colleagues), called *How Can We Know?* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1985) which I found very moving; a list of its chapters — "The Call," "The Way," "Forgiveness," "Bread of Heaven," "The Upper Room," and "The Truth," will suggest the tenor of its contents.

Wilson's *C.S. Lewis* is a book by a contemporary Christian, a man of forty who never met his subject. It cannot, and probably not intended to, supplant the magisterial *Jack* by George Sayer, who was Lewis' student and friend. What it does do is two-fold. First, it shows vividly the intense personal role of Lewis, who, just in my generation, has become a powerful presence, in this case particularly through the Narnian Chronicles, in the life of the a concerned and practising Christian perfectly at home with the cutting edge of theological thought and Biblical interpretation, a late twentieth century British Anglican. Clearly Lewis' work is alive and well on the eve of the twenty-first century, not only in our own credulous North America (portrayed with stinging wit but little charity by Wilson), but in Maggie Thatcher's heartless England.

Second, it deals openly with the grimy paws Lewis imagined himself wishing to be allowed to wash clean in Purgatory before entering Heaven. Lewis was deeply estranged from his own father; Well, says Wilson, he made his peace with God only after that father died. Central to

the estrangement had been Albert Lewis' failure to join his son on the eve of his departure to the trenches of World War I. Janie Moore, a handsome woman of 45, was there instead, and for years after Jack returned (as Mrs. Moore's son did not) from France, Albert Lewis unknowingly supported not only his son but his son's female companion and her daughter, Maureen. Wilson brings to his analysis of this liaison his own interviews with Maureen. The picture he draws is vivid and to some degree convincing. We can't really know if Jack and Janie were lovers, Wilson admits, but they may well have been.

His argument for this, and its most peculiar wrinkle (as he sees it) is of mixed quality. The likelihood of a physical relationship, given the sharing of a household between the admittedly highly-sexed youth and the warm, needful woman, is quite strong (I do not say overwhelming). But Wilson thinks that Lewis allowed himself to be endlessly interrupted by the domestic affairs of his consort because he was a masochist who derived, I take it, sexual gratification from what Wilson evidently regards as the debasement of helping to make marmalade and run errands. Now, I write this as a woman who is not only a Full Professor but a wife, mother, and grandmother. At any moment any member of this extended family is likely to walk in and ask me for aid, and like St. Thérèse at the sound of the convent clapper, I'll lay down my pen (or stop typing) and do what they ask. The case has to be built on Lewis' gleeful boyhood sadism, for which the only evidence (which is, in fact, convincing) is his own powerful language in letters to his closest friend; unlike Charles Williams, there is no evidence that Lewis ever enacted actual physical sadism. It must also be built upon its likely source, the trauma of his undoubtedly sadistic school, and argument blunted by Wilson's refusal to take that pathetic sojourn at the full value Lewis gave to it. Sadists are, Wilson is saying, also masochists. Only a masochist would uncomplainingly help the woman who shared his home in carrying out her domestic chores. Really?

Other commentators have noted or refuted other weaknesses in this biography, notably Wilson's notion that Lewis turned to writing the Narnian Chronicles because he was defeated in a debate with G.E.M. Anscombe, an argument which like all single-factor explanations seems superficially convincing but is fundamentally questionable, and Wilson's very scant attention to Lewis' masterpiece, *Till We Have Faces*. Nobody however has made the point that scamping *TWHF* is a mistake not only because the book is a masterpiece but because it backs Wilson's thesis that Lewis engaged in denial of his own sinful behavior and that a sinner, because of the pain of facing one's own self, must at last go "bareface" before

God, As Orual must go before the gods in *TWHF*.

On the other hand, Wilson gives very good discussion so *That Hideous Strength* and *A Grief Observed*, taking them as they should be taken, at full value; and it is obvious he is a full devotee of Narnia, which he discusses briefly but tellingly. His best feature is his vigorous, sharply focussed, intelligent, passionate, albeit voyeuristic and quirky deconstruction of all notions of sanctity as a trait that saints are born with, and his clear recognition that sanctity was a prize for which Lewis paid the uttermost farthing.

I do suggest that many American readers may wish to omit the cruel passages in the Preface, "The Quest for a Wardrobe," and in the concluding chapter, "Farther Up and Further In." This book (like the Psalms) would read perfectly well without these unkind and frequently inaccurate remarks about many entirely blameless people who in most cases Wilson does not even know personally, and Wilson's uncharities could well be avoided. Other readers may — with gritted teeth — be willing to see themselves as others see them, on the principle of the mote and the beam.

The one unanswered question, perhaps because it is unanswerable, is this: whatever tragedies and traumas shaped the personality and lifestyle of C.S. Lewis, why was he, unlike many other orphans, masochists, or whatever, the author of an arms'-length of books which, ranging from the infernal to the supernal, continue to point the way toward God for millions of people around the world? Wilson does not tell us, but even so, his *C.S. Lewis* is a compulsive, delightful, hair-raising, hilarious, annoying, un-put-downable, inspiring, bullying, winsome, and a fascinating read, and is highly recommended.

— Nancy-Lou Patterson

The Essence of the Man

A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* London: Collins, 1990, 334 pp. ISBN 0-00-2151375; New York: W.W. Norton, 1990, 334 pp. ISBN 0-393-02813-5.

Like the delightful cottage that Hansel and Gretel found in the woods, novelist A.N. Wilson's biography of C.S. Lewis looks wonderful and is easy to feast upon. Most readers start nibbling, then start gobbling, and exclaim that it's delicious. But at this point I feel like a little bird that chirps a warning to forest travelers. C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams would all have loathed this book, and rightly so.

(In order to review Wilson's book honestly, I must point out first that he attacks me twice in it. In the preface — without mentioning that he is writing under contract to Collins, the publisher of *The Dark Tower* and Walter Hooper's books — he pretends that *The Dark Tower* has been proved genuine, and he impugns my C.S. Lewis Hoax. In chapter 16 he lampoons me as one of Lewis' goofiest fans, and again his facts are flat-out wrong. Being fictionalized by a famous novelist is quite an adventure,

and I only wish that he had made me glamorous or really comic while he was at it. Partially forewarned, I wrote to Wilson with corrections two months before publication of his book; but he ignored my letter.)

The good news is that Wilson is dramatic, entertaining, and nimble-witted; a writer who lightly tosses words and ideas into the air for the fun of seeing what he can do to please the public and skewer anyone handy. The bad news is that when illusion is more fun than reality, Wilson chooses illusion. He claims to be smashing two images of Lewis, but in fact he is smashing three. And he sets up a brand new Lewis image of his own, one that makes him look very clever at Lewis' expense.

First, Wilson attacks a Roman Catholic myth and C.S. Lewis' perpetual virginity. But the existence of that Catholic myth is itself a Wilson myth based upon a Walter Hooper myth. Hooper's insistence upon Lewis' celibacy has never been accepted by such Roman Catholic Lewis authorities as George Sayer, Dom Bede Griffiths, and Sheldon Vanauken. Even Father John Randolph Willis, in *Pleasures Forevermore: The Theology of C. S. Lewis* from Loyola University Press, accepts Lewis' account of his marriage in *A Grief Observed*. But Wilson slays his first strawman with a flourish and makes Roman Catholics look silly.

Second, Wilson attacks the Protestant myth that C.S. Lewis didn't smoke and drink. That purported Protestant belief in another Hooper creation, and Wilson professes to believe in it. Paradoxically, he has to admit that abstemious Protestants admit that Lewis smoked and drank (Lewis' tankard and pipes are on display in the Wade Center), but he concludes that in doing so they fail to take the matter seriously enough. "Evidence is only of peripheral interest when the idolatrous imagination gets to work." Unlike the irritatingly tolerant Protestants, Wilson takes drinking a smoking so seriously that he claims against all evidence that Lewis disliked nonsmokers. (Lewis' good friends Roger Lancelyn Green and George Sayer were both nonsmokers, and Lewis tried to quit but couldn't.) But Wilson slays his second strawman with a flourish and makes Protestant look silly.

Third, Wilson attacks C.S. Lewis' own portrayal of himself as a reasonably healthy-minded Christian. Wilson reduces Lewis' evangelizing Christianity to a crippled way of coping with life. He claims that Lewis' account of his boyhood frustration with prayer can't be true. Then in one of the most amazing passages in his book (on page 162), Wilson claims to have been considering for twenty years a June 1938 letter from Lewis to Owen Barfield that shows how warped Lewis' thinking was when he began defending Christianity. At that time, Wilson says, Lewis turned against innocent pleasures such as feeling the wind in your hair, walking with bare feet on the grass, and swimming in the rain: Lewis decided these activities were Nazi or would lead to homosexuality. Thus "one must also view with ambivalence his excursion into the realm of religious apologetics." Wilson slays his third strawman with a flourish, and makes C.S. Lewis look silly.

But anyone can see by reading the passages in *Letters*, Lewis was reporting an idiosyncrasy that he overheard from two undergraduates, and he was horrified by it. "Think it over: it gets worse the longer you look at it," he urged Barfield. Wilson now attributes the students' notion to Lewis himself, thus impugning Lewis' common sense and his Christian apologies.

Fourth, while rejecting the two insubstantial Hooper myths and C.S. Lewis' substantial account of his religious pilgrimage, A. N. Wilson substitutes his own ideological Freudian view of C.S. Lewis. Thus the real C.S. Lewis, he claims, was not a perpetual virgin, not a nonsmoker and nondrinker, and not the genuine Christian believer he wanted to be. He was instead a terrified Oedipal neurotic and a closet misanthrope. The Narnian wardrobe is a symbol of Flora Lewis' private parts. Surely it is disingenuous for a biographer to psychoanalyze an author this way without telling readers what that author wrote about such psychoanalyzing. Wilson doesn't even mention Lewis' trenchant essay "Psycho-analysis and Literary Criticism" and what Lewis says in it. I call that cheating.

The hero of this book is A.N. Wilson, who quickly and easily sees through everything, and who winks at his readers because they are now in on the joke also. In this droll style of writing typical of London's *Spectator* (where Wilson used to be literary editor), the joke is never stated clearly; but it is based on the assumption that everyone except the author and his reader is patently absurd. Thus Wilson shows deference to C.S. Lewis, comes across as a remarkably young and generous, an enlightened and refined wise man's patient, understanding tribute to a popular but coarse, befuddled, blundering, and self-deluded eccentric of his grandfather's era. It is in that spirit that Wilson alleges that once a year Lewis forced all his embarrassed (male) students to get thoroughly drunk and tell dirty jokes with him. He even recounts what the obnoxiously drunk Lewis allegedly said to one of his drunken students at the urinal.

Wilson is titillating to read, and he displays such self-assured flash and dazzle that few readers and reviewers stop to ask, "Wait a minute — who is this young man to set himself up as the condescending but ultimately gracious judge of C.S. Lewis? He certainly doesn't seem to have read and digested most of Lewis' writing, and many of his facts are wrong." Wilson presumes to call the Lewis brothers and Janie Moore by their private nicknames, Jack, Warnie, and Minto, and even refers to Albert Lewis by his sons' secret, slightly mocking nickname, "the P'daybird." These liberties give readers the impression that Wilson is the ultimate insider — as he really was when he stuck to writing novels.

In his list of Lewis periodicals, Wilson includes the *Portland Chronicle*, which expired in 1984, but skips both *Lewis Legacy* and *Mythlore*. If he had described the Mythopoeic Society, he surely would have made his readers chuckle with amused disdain. This is how he treats the Wade Center in Illinois. He pretend that he did significant research

there; but in fact he visited for less than three hours, and most of what he says about it is wrong. Yet he gives unwary readers the impression that he is a kindly but amused authority on this obviously bizarre and silly place.

The facts in Wilson's books are often borrowed from other people's books without acknowledgment or else are highly questionable. His errors, misrepresentations, and fabrications range from extremely clear-cut to very subtle. The latter, such as his simplistic dismissal of Lewis' apologetics and his inaccurate summaries of complex philosophical issues, require too much time and expertise for me. (I recommend James Bowman's review in *The American Spectator*, J.M. Cameron's in *The New York Review of Books*, Lyle Dorsett's in *Chronicle*, and Christopher Derrick's in *The New Oxford Review*.)

Here is a random sampling of Wilson's simpler misrepresentations, errors, or questionable statements.

1. Lewis idolatry, like Christianity itself, has resorted to some ugly tactics as it breaks itself in [Protestant and Roman Catholic] factions. (xvi) (*I have not yet seen this purported Lewis idolatry, much less any sign of the bitter Protestant-Catholic feud with which Wilson spices his introduction.*)
2. The Marion E. Wade Center on the upper floor of the college library is devoted to the memorabilia of various Christian writers: George MacDonald, T.S. Eliot, Dorothy L. Sayers, Charles Williams, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and his brother Warren. (xiii) (*Wilson leaves out G.K. Chesterton and Owen Barfield, but wrongly includes T.S. Eliot.*)
3. ...here the faithful may see Muggeridge's portable typewriter kept, like the body of Lenin, in a glass case. (xiii) (*Muggeridge's typewriter is not at the Wade Center.*)
4. As Lyle W. Dorsett ... concedes, Lindscoog has gone too far in her assaults on Hooper's good name. (xiv) (*Lyle Dorsett denies having said this.*)
5. In 1894, Thomas Hamilton at length consented to give his daughter's hand in marriage to a solicitor in the Belfast police courts called Albert Lewis. (3) (*It was Flora who kept Albert waiting, not her father.*)
6. While no grown-up was looking, Flora distinctly saw this figure [the body of a saint in a glass case] open her eyelids. (2) (*Wilson leaves out the fact that this paranormal experience was not original with Flora; it had reportedly happened earlier to other visitors to that church.*)
7. ...the gentleman [a farmer in a tweed suit] pulled down his trousers, squatted on the floor of the railway carriage and defecated. ...the smell in the compartment was so powerful as to be almost nauseating. (5-6) (*Wilson's 22 line description of this incident and his claim that it enshrined Lewis' reaction to Ireland need to be checked by serious researchers.*)
8. ...as the mask of the Steward makes clear in his allegory of the matter, the very fact that the doctrine of hell was believed in by decent, amiable people, who enjoyed their beer and their whiskey, made it harder, not easier for [Lewis'] imagination to absorb. (10) (*Lewis didn't say anything about the decency and amiability of beer and whiskey*

drinkers or their belief in hell and how this made it harder for his imagination to absorb.)

9. More than most men, [Lewis] was the product of his upbringing and ancestry. (1). *(There is no possible way that Lewis could be more a product of his upbringing and ancestry than most men.)*

10. ...Mrs. Joy Gresham of Westchester, New York... (236) *(Joy was from Dutchess County, not Westchester.)*

11. The death of Minto in January 1951 had provided necessary emotional punctuation in Lewis' life, an opportunity to start again from childhood. (238) *(There was no "necessary emotional punctuation," and he did not regress to childhood in 1951. Wilson must have meant something else.)*

12. Most surviving Lewis manuscripts, however, both of his literary productions and of his letters, are preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, where it is also possible to read photocopies or microfiches of Lewis holdings in other libraries. (311) *(According to the Wade Center, more letters are preserved there than at the Bodleian.)*

13. He made Capron into a monster. It may very well be the case that the man was a monster, but since we may only view him through the creative lens of the Lewis brothers' memory, there is no knowing what he was like in other people's minds. (25) *(But Capron was certified insane and locked up. Surely that tells us what he was like!)*

14. The passengers, for example, where he describes his longings to abandon Christianity because of an over-scrupulous terror that he was not sufficiently concentrating on his prayers, while they may be true in general, are far too specifically recalled to be plausible. The details are too sharp. (29) *(Wilson does not give any reason for disbelieving accounts that are detailed and specific.)*

15. It is no surprise that, upon reading *Phantastes*, Lewis heard a sound like the voice of his mother. (47) *(It is no surprise that Wilson says Lewis heard a voice like his mother's instead of God's as Lewis indicated.)*

16. "Also, unknown at this time to either of his sons, he [Albert] Lewis had started to drink very heavily." (52) *(That may be, but as usual Wilson gives no documentation, and Ruth Hamilton Parker denied Wilson's claim about her uncle's alcoholism when she heard him on a television interview.)*

17. Before they had been separated and sent off to different regiments, Paddy and Jack had made a pact: in the event of one or the other's death, the survivor would 'look after' the bereft parent of the one who had been killed. (56) *(Wilson gives no evidence at all for this Walter Hooper story.)*

18. If one wants to know what she [Mrs. Moore] meant to the young Lewis one should read the vision in *The Great Divorce* of a Great Lady surrounded by a procession of angels, children and animals. (72\) *(The idea that the bitterly atheistic Mrs. Moore was ever a Beatrice figure to Lewis is preposterous.)*

19. His fascination with what he deemed to be Christian literature provided him with a good excuse for taking no apparent cognizance of the fact that a profound change

had taken place, during his generation, in the human consciousness, and in Western art and literature. (78) *(What did Lewis "deem" to be Christian literature? Isn't Wilson's "profound change" the very change that Lewis railed against in his inaugural address at Cambridge and in The Abolition of Man?)*

20. In the latter days, he made rather a "thing" of preferring children's books to grown-up literature. (79) *(Simply not true. He loved grown-up books to his death.)*

21. Minto ... began to develop a series of psychosomatic conditions which strengthened the ties binding him to her side. ...rheumatism... (92) *(How bold of Wilson to diagnose Mrs. Moore's rheumatism. When he gets an arthritic disease, he may not write it off as psychosomatic.)*

22. After years of living with Lewis she still knew but did not know that "a man" could regard reading as the main business of the day and everything else as an interruption. (93) *(What does Wilson mean by "a man" and how does he know what Mrs. Moore "knew but did not know"?)*

23. I suspect that Mrs. Moore's sense of humour contributed much to the genuine streak of misanthropy in Lewis' nature. (95) *(Lewis was no misanthrope. And if he had been, how could Mrs. Moore's alleged sense of humor have contributed?)*

24. ...Screw tape, it has to be admitted, is a cruel book... (177) *(Is it?)*

25. It is no wonder that *Perelandra* is an artistic failure. (183) *(Poor, added Lewis thought it was an artistic success.)*

26. Perhaps none of Lewis' portraits is more cruel than that of the figure of Dante himself, who ... is represented as a dwarf leading the other part of himself, the Tragedian, round on a chain ... (201) *(A strange misreading of The Great Divorce. If Dante is in it at all, he is the busdriver.)*

27. ... by a strange series of chances, the *Lewis Papers* now reside in an air-conditioned cavern in the suburbs of Chicago. (139) *(Warren typed them, owned them, and chose to donate them to the Lewis collection in Illinois when Clyde Kilby asked him to do so. How is that a strange series of chances? And since when is a basement a cavern, and why would any Illinois library lack air-conditioning?)*

28. It is true that she [Mrs. Moore] was not academic; this was part of her charm for Lewis. (141) *(But Lewis was charmed by intellectual women.)*

29. There can be little doubt that the energy and passion of the Narnia stories spring from the intensely unhappy and depleted state through which he had been passing. (225) *(In June 1951 Lewis remarked to Sister Penelope that things were marvelously well.)*

30. The moment when the Witch "in an loud and terrible voice" traps the children underground and tries to persuade them that there is no world above the ground as they suppose, is a nursery nightmare version of Lewis' debate with Miss Anscombe. (226) *(This is a factual misreading of the storyline of The Silver Chair as well as a cavalier interpretation.)*

31. Lewis continued, throughout his life, to be obsessed not

only by his father, but also by the possibility that his life could be interpreted in a purely Freudian way. (110) (*There is no evidence that Lewis was obsessed.*)

32. In *The Times* the next day [22 March 1957], Jack's oldest friends read with astonishment an announcement of which they had been given absolutely no warning: "A marriage has taken place between Professor C.S. Lewis ..." (264) (*This announcement was in The Times 24 December 1956.*)

33. A good example of this was the brilliant television play *Shadowlands* by Bill Nicholson, subsequently written up by Brian Sibley as a book... (306) (*Brian Sibley wrote the play and book long before Bill Nicholson rewrote the play from scratch.*)

34. On 15 June 1963, Lewis had a heart attack and was taken into the Ackland Nursing Home. (295) (*The heart attack was on 15 July 1963.*)

35. Thus passed the month of August and some of September. Then Hooper went back to the United States, intending to return as Lewis' full-time secretary after Christmas. (269) (*Hooper left before the end of August, and was invited to return later for a visit, as stated in a late 1963 letter from Richard Ladbrough, Pepys Librarian at Cambridge.*)

36. According to an oral memory of Joy's son Douglas, transcribed in the Marion E. Wade collection at Wheaton College, Illinois, the two of them were already lovers in 1955. Douglas on one occasion came into his mother's bedroom at 10 High Street and found it occupied by Jack and Joy in a compromising position. (256) (*According to Lyle Dorsett, Douglas Gresham never told this story at Wheaton and it is not in the Wade collection.*)

37. Devastated by the discovery of yet another of her husband's infidelities six months after Douglas was born, Joy had a religious experience. (237) (*As she and Lyle Dorsett have told the story, she was devastated because her husband called to say his mind was cracking, not because of his infidelities.*)

38. He was frightened that hostile readers of his theological work would be able to say that his religion could be "explained in terms of the Oedipus complex (or perhaps the Hippolytus complex)... So much did he dread that his own cause was a case of "redemption by parricide" that he emphasized his unwillingness with which he accepted the divine call with language which is exaggerated and almost course. (111) (*Wilson not only fails to support this claim, but on page 110 he also makes the incongruous suggestion that perhaps Mrs. Moore was a Phaedra, Lewis' father was a Theseus, and Lewis, crossing the channel to Ireland, was Hippolytus.*)

39. The confrontation with Elizabeth Anscombe ... drove him into the form of literature for which he is today most popular: children's stories. (211) (*There is no evidence to support this theory.*)

40. It would be far too glib to suggest that he consciously made the second change, to adopt Christianity, merely to give himself an excuse to abandon sexual relations with Mrs. Moore, whatever the nature of those relations had been. (128) (*Wilson repeatedly uses this backhand device, saying that he won't say something in order to say it. For*

example, on page 306 he says of J.B. Phillips, "It would be churlish to point out ... periodic bouts of lunacy/ churlish because irrelevant." Thus Wilson is in fact suggesting to his readers that Lewis' conversion was initially a dishonest maneuver. If Wilson hadn't meant to suggest that, he would not have done so.)

In conclusion, A.N. Wilson is a highly skilled professional writer of the gymnastic type (cartwheels, tightropes, and trapezes), and we can be grateful when any long, serious-looking book with intellectual pretensions turn out to be as twinkling and energetic as a tabloid. But we shouldn't assume too quickly that Wilson really understands C.S. Lewis or that we really understand A.N. Wilson. He said in *Publisher's Weekly* (15 May 1987) that his novels could be called cruel, that his frequent appearance in British gossip columns is probably a distraction to his British readers, and that he thinks "bearing witness" is admirable but that he doesn't know what he would bear witness to. "I mean, I don't know from month to month or year to year." On page 236 of *C.S. Lewis* he remarks breezily, "In books it does not really matter where fantasy ends and reality begins..."

I don't think it is accidental that A.N. Wilson has now seized the title that Warren chose first, the very title of the Green/Hooper biography, I don't think it accidental that Wilson pokes fun at William Griffin's Lewis biography for its errors. I don't think it is accidental that Wilson ignores the George Sayer biography and even leaves it out of his bibliography. As Pauline Baynes once said to me about someone else, "Too clever by half."

I suspect that Wilson is highly amused by his antics, and his old friends at *The Spectator* seem to think so too. On 10 February 1990 they joshed him in a column about the new poison-pen Lewis biography by "Ann Wilson." "Ever the busy bee, Ann has been diligent in grubbing around in the mud... Such prurience in a biographer is to be roundly condemned." The column went on to reveal that the next Lewis biography will reveal his affair with Marilyn Monroe and his secret life as a part-time cabaret artiste in London's risqué Pussy Galore Club (where along with a couple of other friends, Charles Williams played keyboards and Professor Tolkien played double-bass and kazoo). One of their songs was:

Oh, we think things
'Cos we're the Ink-lings
And we're always winking
Yes, We're the I-N-K-L-I-N-G-S
— INKLINGS!

The Spectator article concluded, "In ignoring this other, even more secret life, Ann has, I fear, failed to grasp the essence of the man."

— Kathryn Lindskoog



* Style . . . Always Style*

Lois Lang-Sims. *Letters to Lalage: the Letters of Charles Williams to Lois Lang-Sims*, with commentary by Lois Lang-Sims, introduction by Glen Cavaliero. Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1989. 89 pp. ISBN 0-87338-398-2.

At the absolute opposite pole to C. S. Lewis and Don Giovanni Calabria's all but supernal correspondence in *Letters: A Study in Friendship* (see *Mythlore* 59, pp. 44-45), *Letters to Lalage* documents, in letters written by Charles Williams to his disciple Lois Lang-Sims, an all but infernal relationship of domination (on his part) and submission (on hers). She had been enticed, under his supposed spiritual direction, to play the role of Lalage, a slave girl. Anyone who has read Williams' *Arthurian* will be able to guess what this might have entailed, considering the whipped slave-girls of the poems, and in fact acts of physical punishment took place on two solemn occasions, administered by him to her, after which he walked "agonisedly" about the room in a state of high excitement.

These repellent scenes led their sufferer to meditate upon what it was that Charles was trying to do," (p. 69) as well they might, but her efforts to relate his behavior to "Hindu and Buddhist Tantra" will not, perhaps, convince every reader. I am not exaggerating the situation: the second episode introduced a prolonged spell of illness, until at last she "saw clearly how Charles had created a fantasy figure called Lalage who had never been Lois." (p. 76) And she emboldened to ask the terrible question which all future readers of Williams' poetry will be required to ask: "was there ... anything in Charles's feeling for his wife [whom he renamed Michal], for his Celia [his name for the woman to whom he transferred the intense *anima* projection he had once bestowed upon his wife], for me, that had to do with us as persons in the actualities of our human state?" (p. 76)

When she made her case to him, "that I had only mattered to him as a slave girl in a myth," (p. 82) he sent her *The Region of the Summer Stars* (long delayed in press), and remarked, "I should ... hate to have them spoiled for you." (p. 82) He was quite right. Many who read *Letters to Lalage* with care are likely to have the Williams *Arthurian* poems spoiled for them. The next to last time this unlikely pair met, accidentally, on the Underground, he "blushed literally to the roots of his hair." (p. 84) Evidentially he knew better: "Style, my princess, and always style! 'Love is always courtesy'; it does not behave itself unseemly!" (p. 42) he had written to her at one point. But he was unable to contain himself, and he knew that too.

C.S. Lewis concluded, after describing the sad little sodomies of his boyhood school, that most of the participants had died in the trenches of World War I, and Williams died within three months of his last parting with the rebellious Lalage. Glen Cavaliero, Williams' best commentator, opines that "the situation was poignant rather than sinister," (p. 6) but not all readers will agree.

Is there instruction in all this? Very few of us are really

competent to have absolute control over another person's life. Our little urges, our sorry itches, caused for Williams by who knows what ill-use in his childhood, do not well fit us for power in any great degree. Clearly, Williams could be a most unsuitable spiritual guide on a personal basis. It would have been better if he had not undertaken to be a spiritual advisor of young women. The publication of *Letters to Lalage* may be for Williams' admirers a bitter-sweet event, although I expect that his reputation, which is primarily confined to his devotees, will survive it.

— Nancy-Lou Patterson

A BITTER AFTERTASTE

Lois Lang-Sims. *Letters to Lalage: the Letters of Charles Williams to Lois Lang-Sims*, with commentary by Lois Lang-Sims, introduction by Glen Cavaliero. Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1989. 89 pp. ISBN 0-87338-398-2.

Forty-five years after the death of Charles Williams, a certain Lois Lang-Sims has decided to share the full correspondence written by him to herself. The letters in themselves are interesting enough, but unfortunately they are only a one way correspondence, since no record remains of her letters to Williams. Instead we are given a running explanation between the letters of what they mean and what happened in the intervals between their writing. To accuse the book of being mean-spirited does not go far enough in explaining the motivations of why it should make its appearance, attempting to mar the reputation of Williams, whose personal life was troubled by both economic and romantic tensions, yet, who she admits, attempted to remain loyal to his beliefs.

Lang-Sims makes clear what she is trying to do when she tells us:

...students of Charles' work have inevitably begun to probe into and speculate upon the more problematical aspects of his personal life. My own view is that they should be assisted in the task by those who know what they are talking about. (emphasis added).

She bases her credentials to be an inside informer on her experience with Williams that lasted nearly six months, ending three months before Williams' death.

The books not only is a direct attack on Williams, but his wife, Michal, and his other critics (primarily the unnamed Anne Ridler and Alice Hadfield who knew Williams much longer and have much more convincing credentials), except for Glen Cavaliero (who wrote the introduction to her book). Of his wife she tells us

One never knew with Michal, from one moment to the next, which Michal she was deciding to be.... I adored Michal; but adoring Michal was not an enviable experience. One could be her dearest friend one day, and twenty-four hours later find oneself being scathed by her contempt, the object of her unmitigated disgust. Charles one said in praise of his wife that she was a woman who never passed judgements; The remark was, as might have been expected, strictly accurate. Michal did not judge; she merely, when she felt inclined to do so, spat.

She also attacks C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien:

Nowadays the name of Charles Williams tends to be associated with those of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.... Neither Lewis nor Tolkien were original thinkers: their popularity depends upon a fashion which rates academic fantasy-weaving above the capacity to move freely in the realm of ideas. Charles Williams will be remembered when they are forgotten.

This last sentence may have the possibility, if not the probability, of truth, since no one can clearly foresee the distant future, but the sentence before that is patent foolishness. In more than one place the author admits she is not really qualified to speak on this or that matter, but this does not stop her from giving her opinions. She says more on the relationship of Williams to the Inklings:

I am sometimes asked how fond I think Charles really was of Lewis.; and to what extent he felt identified with the group called "the Inklings," who used to meet in an Oxford pub and talk about their work. The only honest answer is that I have no idea. But I have a suspicion that Charles, in this context, enjoyed being stimulated to talk, while inwardly distancing himself for those to whom he talked. Perhaps, too, he enjoyed seeing himself, occasionally, as a man amongst men. This is... one aspect of the romantic ideal.

How this comment squares with what we know through numerous books of the Inklings' interactions, I leave to the reader.

The letters tell of a "master-disciple" relationship where "the essence of the experiment was restraint." She tells us

...he never attempted to persuade anyone — lover, disciple, colleague, or friend — to follow him spiritually, intellectually, or physically one step further than he or she was genuinely willing to go. Those of us whom much was demanded knew that we had only to hesitate for an instant and the demand would be withdrawn.

She sees herself as a "stand-in" for a woman called Phillida by Williams, for whom Williams had had a strong romantic yet platonic affection, and whom had married another and moved out of his life. Soon after an aborted love affair with another man, Lois herself believed she was in love with Charles, even though she knew he was a married man, and nearly thirty years her senior.

The book is shocking in the freshness of the love-hate feelings she brings after more than 45 years. In this passage after the spank, she gives an interesting analysis:

Charles had shown no sign of being sexually aroused at any time.... I have come gradually to a partial understanding of what it was that Charles was trying to do. Somewhere on the borderlines of religion and magic there exists a traditional methodology concerned with the achievement of power through sexual transcendence. This idea is not — or not necessarily — a part of the cult of romantic love in the Dantean sense, although there is clearly a strong association between the two. The practitioner enters intimate physical contact with a woman... without sexual arousal taking place beyond a certain predetermined point. (in Hindu and Buddhist Tantra this point is almost incredibly far advanced).... The two

methods — typified by the Beatrician ideal on the one hand, and Tantric exercises on the other — together exemplify the way in which apparent opposites can become, in practice, inextricably entwined. At the highest level of all, where the goal sought is the state of unification with Divine Love, the theme blends imperceptibly into the mysticism of the Sufis and the flowery ecstasies of a John of the Cross. I am wholly unqualified to say more: but this much must be said, if one is to begin to understand the kind of relationship with young women that Charles, whose fascination with this particular tradition, in all the forms is has assumed in the West, was second only to Christianity as a dominant influence in his life, was in the habit of setting up.

Did Charles toy with Lois; was he acting out some sexual fantasy? The quote above shows that the situation was much more complex than such a surface appraisal of this kind. It might be correct to say he did not choose his initiate with sufficient care. And what is he guilty of — adultery, rape, murder? No. The fact is — so she says — that he lifted up her skirt and spanked her bottom with a ruler, as the physical focal point for whatever he was attempting to accomplish. This is rather tame stuff for our jaded senses today. If he so disposed, he could have done much, much more. If *her* account is true, it is possible he may have succumbed to a temptation invoked by a love-struck young woman. And for *this* we are to throw out the genius that produced the *Taliessin* poems, his seven ever enriching novels, and deeply inspired literary criticism? Should lapse of discretion — if that is what it was — be an unforgivable sin?

In all of this, I cannot but help to think of King David of the Bible, who knew both the love of different women and Prince Jonathan, who connived to have a rival killed in battle so he could have Bathsheba, and yet despite *all* this is called the "Apple of God's Eye," and is considered the greatest King of Israel. Why? Did he ask forgiveness for what he knew was a transgression? He did.

Did Williams later feel he did wrong? Again, going by her account, the fact that he violently blushed in seeing Lois after the incident, indicates he did. They exchanged letters after this "blushing event," in which he said to her accusation that all she "mattered to him [was as] the slave girl in his myth"

...I hope...that any views you may have held about my limitations to — shall we say? — 'slaves' may be dispelled, and that the poems, as well as I, may be free. I should — egotistically, much less in a lordlier sense — hate to have them spoiled for you. If one may discreetly say so.... Anyhow, forgive me....

For Christmas she sent him a gift, and later in February or March of 1945 they met for lunch in Oxford and parted amicably with him kissing her hand in a flourish. That was the last she saw or heard from him.

The War was hard on everyone, but especially Williams. His health was shaky, but he managed to live to see the end of the War in Europe. Shortly before he died, on May 8, 1945, he spoke to Father Gevers Mathews —

whom he knew through the Inklings — and asked in the conversation

if he would say a Mass 'for anyone I have ever loved in any way.' Although nothing was said, Father Mathew felt very strongly that C.W. has a sense that he was going to die. The Mass was said. (Alice Mary Hadfield, *An Introduction to Charles Williams*. London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1959. p. 208)

A week later he died. I sense from this that he did indeed make peace with God before he died, and the asking for the Mass was part of the final process.

It seems that the author of this little book is torn between two cross purposes: to be as objectively factual and praiseworthy as part of her can bring herself to be, and to attack Williams for not being and doing what she wanted him to be and do. In the end the desire to malign wins out, but she leaves enough mitigating information in her wake to doubt her vilifying conclusions. She says early in her book of him

I have found myself thinking that in him there burned a flame of pure sanctity that redeemed not only his eccentricities but even the seeming ruthlessness of his methods and his experiments. (page 32.) and ...Charles was a man who immolated mind and body in the cause of achieving an infinitely delicate and accurate balance of the opposites, not in theory, not in the abstract, but in himself? In this fearful tension he chose, continuously, to live — and by it he was so severely torn that it was, I believe, the cause of his untimely death. That is what made him — as he was — a great human being and something akin to a saint. (page 38.)

— Glen GoodKnight

The Key and the Lock

Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie, editors, *The Riddle of Joy: G. K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 304 pp. ISBN 0-8028-3665-8.

A miracle is said to be something that happens at the right time, so my feelings that my presence at the G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis Conference held jointly by Seattle Pacific University and Seattle University in 1987, upon which this volume is based, had a touch of the miraculous may be justified. Besides the fun of myself delivering a paper at Seattle University, where I spent nine years during my twenties as a Lecturer in the Department of Education, I heard (at Seattle Pacific) the wisest and most delightful paper ever delivered in my presence. The paper, "Derrida Meets Father Brown: Chestertonian 'Deconstruction' and that Harlequin 'Joy,'" by Janet Blumberg Knedlick, is included in *The Riddle of Joy* and is worth the trouble of locating a copy of the book for itself alone.

Once having the volume in one's hand, however, other felicities (some lesser than others) can also be found. The balance of the contents is tilted slightly in favor of GKC over CSL. There are three essays comparing or relating the two men, eight on Chesterton, and six on Lewis. The interest of Chesterton's students are also better served than

those of Lewis', because most of the Chesterton essays are original research presented with a certain freshness, while the Lewisian essays contain a majority of writers whose books we know and some of whose work here is inclined toward summing up past scholarship or presenting one more time ideas already addressed elsewhere. Perhaps it is exhausting to be a Lewis "heavy" trotted out again and again over more than a decade at nearly every conference in the U.S. and Britain!

The essays addressing GKC together with CSL are these: featured speaker Christopher Derrick's "Some Personal Angles on Chesterton and Lewis," a memoir combined with the now obligatory polemic against "Lewis-worship and . . . Chesterton-worship" (p. 9); John David Burton's "G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis: The Men and Their Times," which attempts to discuss the social criticism of the two — very ably as regards GKC, who as a journalist and a Distributist wrote reams of political and social commentary — and rather less adequately on CSL, whose masterpiece of social criticism, *The Abolition of Man*, the strongest statement of the dangers of some people controlling most other people to be penned in the twentieth century, is unaccountably missing from the discussion; and David Leigh's "The Psychology of Conversion in Chesterton's and Lewis's Autobiographies," which is a very well balanced study of this endlessly intriguing and significant subject. So far, so good.

Because I want to close with Professor Knedlick's virtuosic piece, I will now list the essays on Lewis. First and certainly least is Walter Hooper's "C.S. Lewis and C.S. Lewises," another chapter in the continuing saga of Hooper's efforts to persuade us of how long, intimately, and well he knew C.S. Lewis; this is followed by James M. Houston's excellent, moving, and genuinely valuable "The Prayer Life of C.S. Lewis;" Thomas T. Howard's "Looking Backward: C.S. Lewis's Literary Achievement at Forty Years Perspective," a somewhat disappointing effort, considering the strength of Howard's books on Lewis; Evan K. Gibson's "The Centrality of *Perelandra* to Lewis's Theology," a striking, vivid, and convincing essay; a slight and somewhat valedictory essay by Lyle W. Dorsett, "C.S. Lewis: Some Keys to His Effectiveness;" and a very strong study, "C.S. Lewis's Argument from Desire," by Peter J. Kreeft, which is marred by one particular lapse. I say lapse, because although I find Lewis' argument from Desire convincing, I find it so because the experiences it describes parallel my own spiritual journey (as it likely does many of those who find it convincing). I also find Kreeft's statement of the argument from Desire weakened by his way of phrasing its major premise. He puts it quite clearly at first: "every natural or innate desire in us bespeaks a corresponding real object that can satisfy the desire," (p. 250) and "all natural or innate desires have real objects," (p. 250), but as his essay progresses, he slips into a more questionable usage: "If nature makes nothing in vain, if you admit that premise, then the conclusion necessarily follows." (p. 255) He even insists that "one who wants to

(continued on page 55)

Power emerges as the central issue differing male and female attitudes towards power, which lead to the powerlessness of women and to men's obsessive preoccupation with their personal power. Even magic is seen to be a male prerogative: all mages are men. But in reality, of course, women do have power, even magical power, although cultural norms prevent them from exercising it fully. And it is from witches — women with magical talent who, having no access to the book-learning reserved for males, are obliged to use their talent in a haphazard and primitive fashion, but are by the same token free of the cultural limitations that men are bound by — that Tenar gains some of her most important insights, especially from Auntie Moss — a delightful, lovingly drawn character — who has this to say about men:

A man's in his skin, like a nut in a shell. ... It's hard and strong, that shell, and it's all full of him. Full of grand men-meat, man-self. And that's all. That's all there is. It's all him, and nothing else, inside.

What Tenar discovers is that the limitations imposed by culture, however strong and intimately bound to the personality, are illusory, and that all people, in Reality, are ultimately free, though usually unable (and unwilling) to grasp this freedom. Only the dragons — and dragons, both actual and metaphorical, permeate the book's imagery — exist naturally in this state. But we are reminded by the mythology of Earthsea that dragons and humans are close kin, and that indeed they were (and still are, on a timeless level) one and the same, free of the disdain of the male and female, culture and nature, conscious and unconscious, life and death. It is when they tap this freedom that Tenar and Ged are able to confront the dangers that beset them — and also to discover each other anew; and it is in relation to the world of the dragons that the child Therru's true nature is revealed.

Those who have learned to love the world of Earthsea over the past two decades will not be disappointed by this addition to the canon. And even though the author has stated unambiguously that this is the *Last Book of Earthsea*, it leaves us with so many narrative possibilities that one cannot help wondering if, in time, she might not be tempted to take us back for one more visit.



REVIEWS (continued from page 52)

refuse ... the conclusion ... will deny the premise." Well, I accept the conclusion, but I would at least question the language of the premise; does "nature" make anything? What or who is "nature" that it (she? he?) makes things? I thought *Ged* made everything. Kreeft's essay is, even so, one of the best in the book and I'm grateful to him for taking the trouble to prepare and present it.

Now to GKC: Richard L. Purtil begins with a disappointingly thin memoir about "Chesterton, the Wards, the Sheeds, and the Catholic Revival," a subject of considerable importance; Ian Boyd presents a thoughtful as well as charming portrait of "The Legendary Chesterton," discussing the pre- and post-conversion to Roman Catholicism versions of his man; William Bissett gives a thorough and delightful study of "G.K. Chesterton and Max Beerbohm," including the nearly impossible feat of making us see in our minds caricatures which are not reproduced in his text; Alzina Stone Dale gives a well-researched, detailed, and informative overview of "G.K. Chesterton, the Disreputable Victorian," which is a welcome addition to her other scholarship on GKC; J.P. Corrin discusses GKC and his friend Belloc in the learned and incisive essay "The Chesterbelloc and Modern Sociopolitical Criticism;" David J. Dooley's superb essay "Chesterton in Debate with Blatchford; the Development of a Controversialist" is a virtuoso display of elegant, careful, clear, and effectively interpreted scholarship; Kent R. Hill's "The Sweet Grace of Reason: The Apologetics of G.K. Chesterton" explores its subject with equal grace; and finally, Janet Knedlick rides a skyrocket of Chestertonian wit into the stratosphere (or the seventh heaven) taking us with her in the essay that opened my review.

Quite simply, she takes on both Derrida and his critics, and wins. The essay ought to be required reading for all Christians. She begins by showing how "Derrida deconstructs Saussure's sign and identifies its implied hierarchy of SIGNIFIED/signifier, as the same false 'move' that enables all the traditional hierarchies in Western thought [GOD/man, SPIRIT/matter, INTEL-LIGIBLE/sensible, KING/commoner, MASCULINE/feminine]." That sentence and particularly Professor Kendlik's profoundly liberating gloss contained in her brackets, simply blew me away when I saw her, a twinkle in her eye and a manuscript in her hand, deliver it. Of course! What terrible destruction of human personality and even life has resulted from these false and falsely weighted dichotomies, which Christians, as incarnationalists, ought to have seen to be mistaken! And she goes on, hilariously recounting an encounter between Father Brown and Flambeau (*not*, note, FATHER BROWN and Flambeau) as a parable of deconstruction. She concludes that "Derrida remains intoxicated with the pursuit of his beloved enemy, and the logos he must unmask." (p. 288) And who is that logos? "The one who bears about in his (elusive) body the marks of his own marginality and harlequin joy" and "the uncanny (non)presence that speaks in the flickering traces of a burning bush." (p. 289)

Kent R. Hill in his study "The Sweet Grace of Reason," concludes that "there is a remarkable fit between the key of orthodoxy and the lock of reality we experience," Chesterton and Lewis have showed their readers both key and lock, and with their help and the help of commentators like those included in *The Riddle of Joy*, we are enabled not only to turn the lock but to open the door.

— Nancy-Lou Patterson