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# "That Most Unselfish Man": George Sayer, 1914-2005: Pupil, Biographer, and Friend of Inklings

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## "That Most Unselfish Man": George Sayer, 1914-2005: Pupil, Biographer, and Friend of Inklings

### **Abstract**

An appreciation of Inklings George Sayer, author of *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times*, widely regarded as one of the best biographies of Lewis. Includes personal reminiscences of his friendship with Sayer, as well as of Sayer's friendships with Tolkien and Lewis.

"THAT MOST UNSELFISH MAN":  
GEORGE SAYER, 1914-2005:  
PUPIL, BIOGRAPHER, AND FRIEND OF INKLINGS

MIKE FOSTER

GEORGE SAYER IS A SUPERB EXAMPLE of one of the greatest blessings of an academic life: a student who becomes, in time, a good friend. His 1988 biography of C.S. Lewis, *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times*, is rightfully respected as the best of the many recollections of Lewis's life, a final act of loyalty and love. He likewise was a friend of J.R.R. Tolkien, and it was his encouragement that led Tolkien to resubmit *The Lord of the Rings* for publication when he had despaired of ever seeing it in print. An occasional Inkling, he was, in Lewis's apt description, "that most unselfish man" (*Letters* 577). No fewer than thirty letters in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis Volume III* attest to his generosity and the affection Lewis felt for him. Like many a man blessed with great teachers, he became a remarkable teacher himself. None of those who met him will ever forget him.

George Sydney Benedict Sayer was born June 1, 1914, in Bradfield, Berkshire, the son of an irrigation engineer whose work abroad included projects in Egypt. During the hot seasons there, George was sent back to England for schooling. Christopher Mitchell, director of Wheaton College's Marion E. Wade Center, writes that he described "his first schooling experience, a pre-prep school in Eastbourne, as brutal and abusive, similar to what Lewis himself experienced at Wynyard. His prep school, located in the northern regions of Perthshire, Scotland, was an improvement—there he was 'merely bored'" ("Profile" 35).

Sayer first met Lewis and Tolkien during Michaelmas term at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1934. His preface to *Jack* described his first encounter with Tolkien, "a neat, grey-haired man with a pipe in his mouth and a puckish face" (xv) waiting outside Lewis's rooms in New Buildings 3.

Lewis, he wrote, was "a heavily built man who looked about forty, with a fleshy oval face and a ruddy complexion. His black hair had retreated from his forehead, which made him especially imposing" (xv). Lewis asked Sayer to name poets he admired and enjoyed. Citing G.K. Chesterton, George began quoting *The Ballad of the White Horse* from memory:

'The great Gaels of Ireland  
Are the men that God made mad.'

I got no further on my own, for with gusto and a glowing face he  
declaimed the next lines with me.

'For all their wars are merry  
And all their songs are sad.' (xvi)

When Sayer emerged, Tolkien spoke:

'How did you get on?' he asked.

'I think rather well. I think he will be an interesting tutor.'

'Interesting? Yes. He is certainly that. You'll never get to the bottom  
of him'. (xvii)

C.S. Lewis's latter-day secretary Walter Hooper, who had urged Sayer to write *Jack*, wrote that "[d]uring his third year in Oxford he realized that Lewis was a Christian, and in his own search for truth he was led to the Catholic Church. He took his BA in 1938 and his MA in 1947. Over time, his friendship with Lewis led him to become friends with [Lewis's older brother] Warnie Lewis, [Lewis 'adopted' mother] Mrs. Janie Moore, and [her daughter] Maureen Moore as well" (*C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide*, 723).

Sayer converted in 1935. Dr. Mitchell states that

George's attempt at finding some religious direction before coming to Oxford had left him spiritually confused. Part way through his course of study at Oxford his confusion gave way to a clear sighted faith through the spiritual counsel of a Catholic priest. "I was walking along St. Giles street," George recalls, "when, attracted by the atmosphere of a Chapel of the Black Friars, I rang the bell and asked to see a priest." George was introduced to Father Victor White, who over the course of time gently and skillfully led him into the Christian faith. George's conversion introduced a new dimension into his relationship with Lewis, for although Lewis never brought Christianity up in his tutorials his faith was quite evident on the level of friendship. Lewis welcomed the news of George's new-found faith. Although there were things about the Catholic church which Lewis didn't like (it was a prejudice he believed he acquired in boyhood), the fact that George had chosen Rome and not Canterbury was never an issue. ("Profile" 36)

Hooper suggests that "it was almost certainly Sayer that Lewis wrote to Dom Bede Griffiths about in his letter of 8 January 1936":

"'Neo-scholasticism' has become such a fashion among ignorant undergrads that I am sick of the sound of it. A man who was an atheist

two terms ago and admitted into your Church last term, and who had never read a word of philosophy, comes to me urging me to read the *Summa* and offering me a copy!” (*C.S. Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 1708-09)

Hardly an “ignorant undergrad,” Sayer was one of the few pupils Lewis invited to the Kilns.

After earning his Oxford BA, Sayer wrote two unpublished novels. In Germany, he translated two theological treatises into English. His German skills led to his captaincy in Army Intelligence during World War II. Dr. Mitchell states that “While most of the work was quite boring, his fluency in the German language was put to good use in the interrogation of young German prisoners. During his stint in the army George heard a couple of Lewis’s broadcast talks. Interestingly, he listened to them in the company of American soldiers who, though busy gulping down English ale, were quiet and listened appreciatively” (“Profile” 37).

Then he returned to his old school, Malvern College, to teach. Julian Roskans’ *Guardian* obituary stated that

It was in the form room at Malvern College that George Sayer [...] made the greatest impact. He had a challenging and arresting manner of teaching, which allowed for no sitting on the fence. He exacted from his classes the very highest standards, all the time encouraging individual expression and interpretation. He guided pupils towards sensitive and thoughtful enjoyment of literature. Never conventional, he always said what he believed. He was renowned for his kindness and sympathy, the sobriquet ‘avuncular’ being most commonly employed by staff and pupils alike.

[Popular British TV *University Challenge* moderator] Jeremy Paxman was a college pupil from 1964 until 1968. He would not have been alone in describing George as ‘the most wonderful, inspirational teacher . . . a profoundly decent and compassionate man . . . the sort of teacher you dream of having’. (Roskans)

After World War II, Sayer began teaching English at Malvern College in 1945, becoming senior English master in 1949. After 33 years there, where Warren Lewis had matriculated and C.S. Lewis had studied one year, he retired as head of English in 1974 and served as college librarian until 1978. Roskans’ obituary continues:

Teaching aside, George had a vital part to play in the re-establishment of artistic and academic standards at the college that had inevitably suffered in the hectic last years of the war. He certainly left a lasting legacy by founding the college wine society.

While in Malvern, George often had the pleasure of entertaining Lewis, by now a close friend. The two delighted in walking the Malvern hills, discussing literature and mutual friends, such as JRR Tolkien. On his return visits to Oxford, George sometimes went to meetings of the Inklings, a gathering of friends, most of them teachers and many of them creative writers and lovers of imaginative literature. After Lewis's death, he was made a trustee of the writer's estate. (Roskans)

George's first wife, Moira Casey, whom he married in 1940, died of cancer in 1977. He then married Margaret Cronin, who survives him, in 1983, "and much enjoyed being stepfather to her children, who loved Lewis's Narnia stories. Their shared hobbies included gardening, reading and Mozart" (Roskans).

While Sayer's affection for and admiration of Lewis illuminate his biography, *Jack* is no hagiography canonizing St. Lewis. Frank and forthright, with a few exceptions, Sayer shares first-hand knowledge earned over thirty years of companionship.

"I have never known a man more open about his private life," Sayer wrote in "Jack on Holiday" in James T. Como's 1979 collection *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*. On their walks together during Lewis's visits to Malvern, "[h]e spoke about his personal temptations, his spiritual difficulties, and worries about other people. He spoke about Mrs. Moore, who was ailing in mind and body [...]. Warnie [his alcoholic brother] was the most constant and long-lasting of his anxieties because [Lewis said] 'he is not merely my brother, but my greatest friend.' He spoke of the growth of his relationship with Joy Davidman, 'an odd but very intelligent person. I am not sure if I like her and pretty sure you wouldn't'" (208).

*Jack* is an intimate and insightful cradle-to-grave account of Lewis's life covering his childhood, his post-war period of poverty, his successful Oxford career, his conversion to Christianity, his emergence as a writer and speaker, his creative camaraderie with Tolkien and others, his life both in college and without, and his surprised-by-Joy late-life marriage, depicted with comprehensive compassion by an eyewitness, one of the best of Lewis's many friends.

Drawing on the Lewis family papers and Warnie Lewis's million-word diary in Wheaton College's Wade collection, Sayer begins with family background and description of the earliest years of Clive Staples Lewis. He sketches a peaceful semi-solitary childhood where Jack and his brother Warren, three years his elder, were inadvertently blessed by confinement at the first sign of rain, begetting a vivid imaginative life inside Little Lea, their Belfast home. Here the *Boxen* stories Jack created were the earliest manifestation of his mythopoeic gift. Their mother Flora died in 1908, six months after cancer was

diagnosed; Jack was nine. Sayer sympathetically summarizes the shocking effect of this loss on Jack. Soon thereafter he was sent off to boarding school in England, whose horrors he depicted in seven chapters in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*; the shock of the Great War and the wounds he suffered merited only a fraction of that.

Fortunately, Albert turned to his old schoolmaster, W.T. Kirkpatrick, and so his unhappy son was sent off for home schooling with Kirkpatrick, later immortalized as MacPhee in *That Hideous Strength*. Lewis thrived, and his love of argument can be traced to that tutelage.

As Lewis does himself in *Surprised by Joy*, Sayer traces young Jack's early love of “Northernness” as a powerful influence. This passion was awakened during Jack's two years at Cherbourg school by the discovery of a periodical reviewing Margaret Armour's *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods* which included an Arthur Rackham illustration of Siegfried “gazing in wonder and astonishment at the sleeping Brunhilde. He has cut off her breastplate and is gazing at her naked breasts” (36). Longfellow's translation of Tegner's *Drapa* with the lines “I heard a voice that cried, / Balder the beautiful / Is dead, is dead—” came next, and not long thereafter the discovery of Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle and obtaining his own copy of the Armour book with Rackham's plates. But “[h]e hid his imaginative life from others [...]. The self he showed to his contemporaries was that of the witty, blasphemous, sex-obsessed schoolboy” (38).

His miserable year at Malvern in 1913-1914 led to his two and a half years of study with Kirkpatrick, “the most peaceful years of his entire life,” Sayer writes. “His freedom at this time from emotional, academic, literary, and monetary pressures enabled him to discover his own tastes, the daily routine he liked to follow, the sort of friends he wanted to have, and the books he most enjoyed reading” (47). Here he was first exposed to Spenser's *Faerie Queen* and Phillip Sidney's *Arcadia*, lifelong favorites and “the subjects of his finest mature literary criticism” (58). Swinburne, Morris, Bunyan, the Romantics he also enjoyed. He began writing his own poetry inspired by these. He learned to read Italian and French. Above all, he became, like Kirkpatrick, a stern rationalist, and his love of argument can be traced to these years. When the time came for him to go to Oxford, he was ready. He arrived at University College April 26, 1917.

But the Great War was on. One whole quad of the college was occupied by wounded soldiers. The dean declined to map a course of study for him because he was fated for full-time tuition in the Officer's Training Corps. After four weeks of that, he perforce left his college and joined a cadet battalion. In a “‘carpetless little cell’ at Keble College,” his roommate was a “good fellow [...] a little too childish for real companionship [...] a very decent sort of man” (69). This was Paddy Moore as Jack described him to his father.

Soon came Lewis's fateful meeting with Paddy's mother Janie Moore. He was 18 and she was 45. Janie King Askins Moore was estranged from her husband in Ireland. She was staying in Oxford with her daughter Maureen, 11, in order to see as much of her son as she could before he was sent to the front. With characteristic generosity, she invited his friends to enjoy her homely hospitality. Sayer writes: "For Jack, who had lost his mother when he was a child and was, in addition, rather homesick for Ireland, it must have been a great pleasure to meet an Irish woman who was kind enough to 'mother' him" (71). Eventually Jack and Paddy made a sentimental vow, each man promising that should one of them be killed, the survivor would look after the other's sole parent.

On April 15, 1918, three months and a week after his arrival in the trenches, Lewis was wounded by friendly fire, a shell that fell short and instantly killed the man next to him; the man standing on the other side of Lewis likewise died of his wounds. While hospitalized, Lewis learned that Paddy Moore was missing; later it was confirmed that he had been killed in action. Jack and Mrs. Moore would live together until her death in 1951.

"Some of those who have written about C.S. Lewis regard his living with Mrs. Moore and Maureen as odd, even sinister," Sayer writes.

This was not the view of those of us who visited the Kilns in the thirties. There she was, a rather stately lady, sitting at the tea table. "Mother, may I introduce Mr. Sayer, a pupil of mine," is what he would say. [...] I thought it completely normal in those days that a woman, probably a widow, would make a home for a young bachelor. We had no difficulty accepting her, even when we came to realize she was not his mother. [...]

But if the relationship were innocent, why was Jack so secretive about it? Certainly, he did not want to worry Albert [...]. Probably, too, Mrs. Moore had asked him not to tell anyone about it and he had given his word. If Mr. Moore found out about Jack and thought that Jack and his wife were living together in adultery, he would have had grounds to divorce her and would not have owed her a cent. (In fact, she wanted a divorce, but he would not agree. This made it impossible for her to have a fair share of his income and obliged her to live in near poverty.) (89)

In 1913, tutor Kirkpatrick had also rescued Warren, who, was "unwilling to face the realities of school life, just as later on he was unwilling to face the realities of life in the army. His escape was to indulge in the fantasy of being 'a bit of a lad,' a cynical character addicted to drinking, rule-breaking, and so on. Later on it took the form of living the life of an officer and gentleman, and in being a snob and in fantasy an aristocrat of the grand era of Louis XIV" (34). Caught smoking once too often, Warnie was sent down at the end of spring term, 1913. Kirkpatrick suggested an army career for him, since "neither brains nor



industry were necessary” (35) and successfully coached him for Sandhurst and thus his career, culminating in his retirement as a Major in December 1932. He, Jack, and Mrs. Moore pooled finances to buy the Kilns in 1930, and Warnie lived there until his death in 1973.

Warnie’s antipathy to Mrs. Moore once he joined the household at the Kilns was expressed in his memoir of his brother appended to his 1966 edition of *The Letters of C.S. Lewis*. Sayer reports in *Jack* that “Of the people who knew Mrs. Moore, Warren seems to be the only one who disliked her” (89). He rejects Warnie’s view that she was a negative influence on Lewis’s career. “[Jack] said in conversation with me that she did him a great deal of good. ‘She was generous and taught me to be generous, too’” (89).

“Were they lovers?” Sayer asks. “Although she was twenty-six years older than Jack, she was still a handsome woman, and he was certainly infatuated with her. [...] It seems most likely he was bound to her by the promise he had given Paddy and that his promise was influenced by his love for her as his second mother” (89).

Here a confidant’s discretion trumps objectivity. Sayer quotes others but reserves comment. While he is circumspect about the relationship between Jack and Janie Moore here and elsewhere in his writings, privately he confided that Mrs. Moore’s daughter Maureen had confirmed it had been a sexual relationship. He likewise confided that he wished that he’d done some things differently in *Jack*, addressing the faults of Lewis’s books more directly, for one. But in the end, his charity and gentility, or perhaps his publisher’s wishes, outweighed that.

Still, he was not one to beatify his friend. In his 1978 presentation to a convocation of students, faculty, and conference attendees at Wheaton College, Sayer said at one point that for a long time, as he notes in *Jack*, Lewis was troubled by guilt about masturbation. Sharing the stage with Sayer, Wade Center founder and director Prof. Clyde Kilby, bless his memory, looked as if he wished he had a Ring conferring invisibility to put on at that moment.

Until his appointment to the Magdalen College fellowship in 1925, Sayer relates that Jack lived in near-poverty. “His only personal luxuries were beer, whiskey, and tobacco, the first and last of which he regarded almost as necessities. He never seems to have owned a watch or a good fountain pen” (107).

Sayer weaves astute commentary on Lewis’s writings throughout this biography, and although he later stated he wished he had expanded these, his critiques of Lewis show that he was indeed a masterful reader of literature. He shares details on the composition of many works. As one example, he outlines Joy’s influence on Lewis’s final novel, *Till We Have Faces*, concluding: “Similarly we can be helped, as perhaps Jack and Joy were, toward self-knowledge and an understanding of the nature of love by meditating on the book. Perhaps Jack,

through writing it, liberated himself from painful obsessions, confusions, and inhibitions. It was a preparation for a complete and successful marriage" (236). Time and again Sayer does what a good literary biographer should: he makes the reader want to read and reread the author he discusses.

Chapter 12, "Pilgrim's Regress," recounts Lewis's conversion to Christianity, "a slow steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness of long standing," as Warren described it. Reversing negative attitudes toward faith he'd formed in boyhood took five years, from 1926 with his newfound "[belief] in a nebulous power outside himself, to 1931, when he became a believer in Christ" (129). Sayer's description of the crucial September 19-20, 1931 late-night stroll with Tolkien and Hugo Dyson on Addison's Walk along the Cherwell at Magdalen is one of the best accounts of that momentous event.

Jack said that he loved reading and thinking about myths, but that he could not regard them as being at all true. Tolkien's view was radically different. He said that myths originate in God, that they preserve something of God's truth [...]. Furthermore [...], in presenting a myth, in writing stories full of mythical creatures [what we here call mythopoeia], one may be doing God's work. As Tolkien talked, there came a mysterious rush of wind through the trees that Jack felt to be a message from the deity, although his reason told him not to be carried away. Tolkien went on to explain that the Christian story was a myth invented by a God who was real, a God whose dying could transform those who believed in him. If Jack wanted to find the relevance of his story to his own life, he must plunge in. (134)

On September 22, the conversion was completed as Jack rode in the sidecar of Warren's motorcycle in the way to Whipsnade Zoo. "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God," Jack wrote, "and when we reached the zoo I did" (135).

One line reveals much: "[Lewis] never merely thought ideas; he also felt them" (130).

Like Tolkien and fellow Inkling Dr. Robert Havard, Sayer had hoped that Jack would convert to Roman Catholicism. But whether it was what Tolkien called "the Ulterior Motive" or what Lewis gave Sayer as the reasons for non-conversion—"your heresies" of devotion to Mary and papal infallibility—that conversion never happened. Still, the two men were both Christians and that fact informed their times together.

*Jack* is likewise remarkable for more literally pedestrian stories, such as descriptions of Lewis's visits and their hikes together in the Malvern Hills. He notes that while Jack washed thoroughly, "[h]e rarely had a bath when he was staying with me, and I think less often still at the Kilns" (207).

On April 2, 1954, Lewis sent Sayer a combined letter of regrets and invitation. "Now, look. By bad luck Mrs. Gresham (our queer, Jewish, ex-Communist, American convert) and her two boys will be here all next week. So we can't come and dine. But cd. you come in on the Tue. or Wed. and meet at the Eastgate at 11 for an hour or more's talk? She's a queer fish and I'm not sure she is either yours or Moira's cup of tea (she is at any rate, *not* a Bore). But it wd. be a v. bright spot for W. and me. Do" (*Letters*, 450). Sayer shows how Joy offended Moira once and he relates his attempts to dissuade Lewis from a civil service wedding for a marriage-in-name only. But he was won over. Joy Gresham changed Lewis for the better, in his view. Visiting the Kilns in 1958, "I was struck by the new paint on the house, the neater appearance of the garden, and the flowers. [...] Her conversation was sensible and practical, not witty, but often direct and abrasive. 'Tell me, isn't it less like a tenement in the South Bronx?' she asked [...]. 'Tell him he won't go broke'" (228). "There was some good-humored banter, an art at which Joy could be nearly as proficient as Jack. But what impressed me most about their marriage was its natural quality. There was no striving to be something they were not, to be clever or even good. They just were. They accepted each other simply, naturally, without fret or fuss. They were kind to each other" (229).

Joy died on July 11, 1960. Sayer eulogizes her thus:

Few marriages can have been more Christian. [...] Jack felt that he had achieved full maturity and manhood only through marriage. [...] In living with Joy, he was being himself. [...] With her, he was free from self-doubt and introspection. He could speak ideas just as they arose and receive back from her answers or arguments that would stimulate still more interesting ideas in his mind. They were a most blessed and richly gifted pair. (232-33)

Lewis's own years were numbered. Sayer writes, "Even in his thirties, Jack was in the habit of passing water far more frequently than most men. He thought the reason was the large amount of beer and tea he drank [...]. Even his friend and doctor, Humphrey Havard [...], did not suspect a problem" (244-45).

But in June, 1961, Lewis begin have difficulty with urination. A seriously enlarged prostate was diagnosed. His surgeon determined that Jack was not fit for surgery. His kidneys were infected, predicating toxemia and cardiac irregularities. "He never lost his sense of humor," Sayer says (245). Nor, alas, did he adhere to his doctor's recommendation of a low-protein diet and a cessation of his addictions to tea and tobacco.

Sayer's visit to the hospitalized Lewis in July, 1963, four months before his death, is sadly touching:

I found him standing up nervously [...] wearing pajamas and a dressing gown. He walked forward, clutched me, and said, "Thank God, a friend. You see a dying man. For God's sake, and as you value our friendship, go and get me some cigarettes [...]." I did as he asked, intending to let him have only one cigarette out of the pack. He smoked it greedily, inhaling deeply. (*Jack* 247-48)

Privately, Sayer implied that he had given Lewis more than that single smoke.

Sayer volunteered to go to Ireland, where Warnie was hospitalized at Our Lady of Lourdes in Drogheda after one of his binges, to fetch him home. He was unsuccessful; Warnie was deemed unfit to travel, although he finally returned after Walter Hooper went back to the United States in late September.

Sayer visited Jack at the Kilns one last time in mid-November. "I think he had gotten up especially in order to have lunch with me and found it a great strain. His face was ominously puffy. He no longer smoked, but several times helped himself instead to some boiled sweets that were on the table. After lunch, he fell asleep and I tiptoed quietly away. This was the last time I saw him" (251). On November 18, Lewis was well enough to be driven to the Lamb for what would be the last Monday morning Inklings meeting of his life.

C.S. Lewis died on November 22, 1963, at nearly the same hour as another famous Jack, Pres. John F. Kennedy. Sayer's book ends with his account of the funeral at Headington Quarry Church on November 26. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, Joy's sons Douglas and David Gresham, Colin Hardie, and Maureen and her husband Leonard Blake, attended, among others.

Warren was not there. He could not bear [it]. He escaped in his usual way, lying in bed all that day, more or less unconscious. In the absence of any blood relative, Maureen, David, and Douglas followed the coffin out of the church.

We clustered around to see the coffin lowered into the grave. It was the sort of day Jack would have appreciated, cold but sunlit. It was also very still. A lighted church candle was placed on the coffin, and its flame did not flicker. For more than one of us, that clear, bright candle flame seemed to symbolize Jack. He had been the light of our lives, ever steadfast in friendship. Yet, most of all, the candle symbolized his unflagging pursuit of illumination. (251-52)

In both his "Afterword" published in the second edition of *Jack*, and his essay "C.S. Lewis and Adultery," included in *We Remember C.S. Lewis*, Sayer criticizes A.N. Wilson's controversial 1990 biography of Lewis. In the latter piece, Sayer wrote: "Unfortunately, it is seriously flawed, and in one vital respect wrongheaded. This is his view that Lewis and Joy had sexual intercourse before

the Christian marriage that took place in the hospital" (101). Sayer refutes this, citing Lewis's remarks to him and two other Inklings, Dr. Havard and Warnie. He adds this evaluation of Wilson's depiction of Lewis: "I, who knew Lewis for twenty-nine years, as pupil and then as friend, find it at times almost unrecognizable. He is presented as a rather unhappy, guilt-ridden creature, obsessed with sadomasochistic fantasies, who often sought relief from his inner conflicts and uncertainties in an overly dogmatic faith, in bullying argument, and, at times, even in deep drinking and bawdy talk" (102). Sayer rejects this view.

A year after the publication of *Jack*, Sayer did two videotaped interviews with Lyle Dorsett, then director of the Wade Collection. These interviews were conducted at Wheaton College on October 10 and 12, 1989. In his introduction to the transcription of them, Dorsett noted that after the interviews, Sayer added some observations that do not appear there. Dorsett wrote:

First, Sayer said he was sorry he had not made a point of Lewis's distrust of money. According to Sayer, Lewis gave away his royalties as well as other money. He was never upwardly mobile. He did not see money as a neutral item. Indeed, he questioned the source of monies and felt God called him to be rid of it. In short, Jesus espoused a dim view of money. Lewis made a valiant effort to emulate the Lord on this.

Along our walk Sayer discussed Lewis's relationship with Mrs. Moore (Janie King Moore). Sayer said that Lady Dunbar (Mrs. Moore's daughter) told him much about the relationship between her mother and C.S. Lewis. This relationship has been shrouded in obscurity for years. Even Warren H. Lewis and Albert Lewis found the friendship between Jack and Mrs. Moore to be a strange one. Sayer says that he hesitated to bring this up in our interview, but on reflection he thinks it should be on record. Lady Dunbar says her mother and Jack had an affair after World War I. It lasted for a few years. Eventually their physical attraction for each other waned, and the affair became one of friendship. Jack's involvement with Mrs. Moore prevented a reconciliation between her and her husband. (Her husband knew about it and broke off overtures for ending their separation). Consequently Lewis, especially after he became a Christian, felt responsible for Mrs. Moore's financial destitution. Therefore he supported her throughout her life. In fact he gradually viewed her as a surrogate mother to whom he owed allegiance and support. (Dorsett and Sayer)

In the interview, Sayer recounted his tutelage with Lewis and praised his Oxford lectures.

There were lectures but entirely voluntary. It was possible to be a student at Oxford and not go to a lecture at all. And it was generally recognized that most lectures were dull. And that one could get more information from reading the books of the lecturers. On the other hand, Lewis's lectures were not like that. They were—he was a lecturer full of vitality, immensely interesting and on subjects on which no books were written. So he drew a lot of people to his lectures, many people who weren't students of English literature at all.

Many people went to his lectures [...]. [H]e might have liked my naive but genuine enthusiasm for English poetry. I think he probably appreciated that. I was nothing like clever enough for him but he liked that. (Dorsett and Sayer)

On the other hand, Tolkien was a “poor” lecturer with a weak voice and a tendency to mutter; attendance at his lectures was sparse.

Though there were differences in faith and culture between Lewis and Sayer, those were no bar to their friendship:

I don't think his Belfast upbringing ever stood between us at all. He seemed to keep it—he seemed to separate it almost completely—it was something which existed in his boyhood which hardly affected his adult life at all. He was—his attitude was not exaggeratedly Protestant at all.

For the first two years when I was being tutored by him, I did not realize he was a Christian. He'd never brought Christianity up, and indeed I think he thought it would have been wrong and improper for him to have influenced his pupils in that sort of way. But when I remarked rather casually, I think in my third year, that I'd become a Roman Catholic, “Well,” he said, “Good. I'm glad you've become a Christian of some sort.”

I happened to live in the part of England where there was good walking which he knew already. Anyway, as soon as I suggested that he should come and spend a weekend on the Malvern Hills, he jumped at the offer. I think he liked the sort of program which we followed when he stayed with me, which consisted very largely of walking and talking.

He would set out as soon as he could after arrival and walk with me on the hills or sometimes my wife would drive us out some distance from Malvern and we would walk back. The arrangement was that he would walk for half an hour, then sit down, and I'm afraid smoke a cigarette. When the cigarette had burnt out, he'd get up and we'd walk again for another half hour. That's the way it went on. And all the time he would talk. He liked walking fairly fast.

He never showed any interest in television at all, or in the radio. He preferred to read. After an evening meal we would have put our slippers on and sit in front of the fire and read to each other or read silently. Then

he would—yes he would go to bed early, I think get up early, I think, say his prayers, usually before breakfast, though he also prayed round about 6:00 in the evening. After he’d got back from the walk, he’d like then to have by him a Bible as he said in any translation. (Dorsett and Sayer)

Their bond was strengthened by the discovery of a mutual interest in George MacDonald.

I remember once mentioning to Lewis at the end of the tutorial, “Ah, Mr. Lewis, I’ve read a remarkable book which I think you might like. You’ve probably never heard of it, it’s called *Lilith* by a Scottish writer called George MacDonald.”

And he said, “You’ve read *that*?”

And I said, “Yes, I think it’s marvelous. A most remarkable book. I don’t know what it means though.”

He said, “What do you think of it?” He said, “Holy Writ apart, I can hardly think of a book as important.” (Dorsett and Sayer)

Sayer also praised Warnie Lewis’s writing.

Warren Hamilton Lewis is very much neglected as a writer. He was a very good historian. He had for years studied the French Seventeenth Century, the reign of Louis the 14th. He knew it extremely well. Joy once said that he had in his head far more than he could ever put down in a book without consulting any sources at all. His books, beginning with *The Splendid Century*, going on with *The Sunset of the Splendid Century*, I think are beautifully written contributions to the history of that century. And I think the first one is perhaps the best of all introductions to the period and to the life of that time.

I don’t think he ever read all his brother’s books. I don’t think he read the books of literary criticism and I know he didn’t read and couldn’t finish one or two of the theological ones. Nor, I think, did he appreciate even the Narnia stories. They had rather different minds. The brother was narrower but within those limits he was a splendid writer and extremely amusing, intelligent and a well-informed person. (Dorsett and Sayer)

Sayer was present when Lewis first met Joy Davidman Gresham.

She was a difficult woman but a very clever and interesting one. Yes, I was privileged to be present at the first lunch that C.S. Lewis gave to her in his rooms at Magdalen College, Oxford. She talked brilliantly and amusingly and asked to be shown around the college. After the meal we went in a conducted tour and she made impish, amusing impish

conversation asking questions, "What's that place there, is it one of the dungeons? What happens behind that door?" And Lewis produced equally amusing replies. We had a very jolly time. Her attitude was anti-American. Lewis rather liked that, I think.

She described the deficiencies, the things that were wrong with American city culture, particularly I supposed New York culture. She was somewhat interested in what we would now call ecology, environment, even farming and gardening, the green earth. This attitude appealed to Lewis. She was abrasive in a way in which I think—well I've—really as an Englishman, I've got no right to say these things—New Yorkers quite often are. I don't think she liked me and I think she didn't get on with several of Jack's friends. [...] I was one of those who was nervous of the effect she might have had on Lewis.

Mrs. Moore had now died, he was free and he described in a letter I remember the glorious freedom he had after her death, like champagne with the cork off, something like that. And it seemed to be rather sad if he was going to be tied up in another relationship. We thought she had designs on Lewis and we didn't know her well enough to trust her. She *had* designs on Lewis, too. (Dorsett and Sayer)

But Sayer noted that Joy turned out to be a good partner for his friend.

She had high spiritual and intellectual qualities. She had a brilliant mind. She could argue and discuss with him as well as anyone he knew. And I'm sure she loved him.

I believe she helped his writing very much indeed. There was a period when he became stuck for a theme for a book or how to go on with a book. He told her about it and he told her the idea he had for the novel that became *Till We Have Faces*. She helped him with that enormously. In fact, it's—it almost ought to be a work of collaboration. I think they planned the writing that he would undertake the following day each evening. He wrote them, the following day she typed it out and they would discuss it.

It's a profound book about the nature of love, about the various kinds of love. The same sort of subject is represented in a different way in the book, another book which is also greatly indebted to Joy, *The Four Loves*. (Dorsett and Sayer)

Sayer observed that *The Dark Tower*, while certainly the work of Lewis himself, is not one that the author wanted to be published: "I don't think it's a good book. I don't think the author thought it was a good book either, if he thought it was a good book he would have gone on with it" (Dorsett and Sayer).



He recalled attending “five or six” gatherings of the Inklings; Tolkien was present at “three or four.” The group

was nothing like a club with formal membership or anything of that sort. It was just, it was a grouping of some of Jack’s friends, some of Jack’s friends who wrote or were interested in imaginative writing of a certain sort. They met in his rooms usually once a week during term time. Sometimes he invited me to come and stay in college for the night of a meeting. On these occasions we would dine in hall in Magdalen College first and then go on to a meeting of the group. You never knew, at least I never knew, who was likely to be there. Tolkien was sometimes there. Sometimes Hugo Dyson, Lord David Cecil occasionally, Humphrey Havard very often, and sometimes a piece of work would be read and discussed and criticized. Warnie was nearly always there. I think one of the ideas in Lewis’s mind was to encourage the writing of imaginative Christian literature. All the members were Christians of various sorts and all the work read would have been of an imaginative sort. Of the kind which is sometimes called mythological. Lewis regarded this as an important, almost missionary activity. He very much wanted to encourage that kind of writing. He thought there wasn’t enough of it and he hoped that the members of the group would help supply the need. Discussions were extremely interesting. There was often a fair amount of disagreement. Tolkien, for instance, didn’t like or approve of the Narnia stories at all. And he didn’t always take kindly to Lewis’s criticisms of his own writing. For instance, Lewis thought that *The Lord of the Rings* should be published without the appendixes [...]. Tolkien insisted that these [...] should be retained. And this is perhaps one reason why it was so difficult to get the book published at all. In fact, as you probably know, Tolkien was at one time in despair that it ever would be published.

Warren didn’t really fit in at all but he somehow enjoyed them. Havard very much enjoyed modern mythological writing. He was very interested. He keenly appreciated Tolkien’s books and the Narnia stories, for instance. I don’t think Warren did, but he just liked being there. It was a pleasant social evening for Warren. (Dorsett and Sayer)

Charles Williams was no longer alive when Sayer began attending Inklings sessions. “Tolkien spoke to me once about Williams’s odd ideas, almost heretical. He wasn’t certain of the soundness of his theology. I think he thought Williams’s ideas or some of them too unconventional” (Dorsett and Sayer).

Unlike Tolkien, whose niggling craftsmanship over his writing is well-documented, Lewis was a much swifter writer, Sayer stated.

He was a very rapid writer and a very correct writer. It was not necessary for him to make very many alterations in his drafts.

He took great care not to attach himself to any particular church in his writing and I think that is their great strength. What he preaches or presents is as he describes it, mere Christianity, just Christianity. The doctrines held by Christians of nearly all churches. This helps to preserve his work and to ensure their lasting quality. They've been lasting pretty well already. *Mere Christianity*, let me see, those broadcast talks appeared during the 1940s and they're already, well, getting on for 50 years old.

The Narnia stories show every sign of lasting; their popularity, I think, I believe, continually increases. I should think they're assured of a position as children's classics, perhaps anyway for the next hundred years, perhaps longer. His literary criticism, his two great works, his three great works, seem to be in their way as good as could be. *The Allegory of Love* is already over 50 years old and it still sells freely and I'm told by those who teach the subject at Oxford that it's still the number one book on that subject. These are remarkable achievements. [Later in the interview, Sayer nominates *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* as the second "great work."] I see, so far, no sign of a decline in the popularity of most of his books. One can't forecast what the position will be in a hundred or two hundred years time. (Dorsett and Sayer)

Lewis was indifferent to the sales success of his books once published, Sayer told Dorsett. "He didn't particularly care, no. He was nearly always essentially interested in the next book he was writing. Or the book he was writing at present or the next book that he would publish. He feared that they wouldn't endure" (Dorsett and Sayer).

The popularity of Lewis's books was not well received by all of his colleagues at Magdalen College, Oxford, Sayer observed. "I remember occasions when I went with Lewis, as a guest with Lewis, to the Magdalen College high table, that there was, afterwards and even during the meal, sharp exchanges between Lewis and other people. Lewis was parrying attacks on Christianity and answering back forcefully. It was not a pleasant atmosphere" (Dorsett and Sayer).

Lewis gave away the money he earned by royalties on his books.

He gave them to individuals who seemed to him to be in need of help. And if he couldn't find a sufficient number of individuals he gave them to public charities of various sorts. It's rather amusing and I suppose characteristic to recall that when he began to give away royalties he didn't realize that he'd have to pay taxes on them. And he gave them away and was horrified to receive large tax bills afterwards. This put him temporarily into considerable financial difficulty.

[His will] left the royalties for the support of his brother and after his brother's death to the two stepsons. I don't think he envisioned that the royalties would bring in very large sums of money in the future. If he had, I don't think he would have done this. And I think he would have disliked very much the idea of such large sums of money, the royalties must be enormous, going to single individuals in that way. He disliked wealth. (Dorsett and Sayer)

In this interview, Sayer told Dorsett that he planned to follow *Jack* with a book on Warnie Lewis, which, unfortunately, he never published.

I don't think the general public understands what a good historian Warren Lewis was and what a good writer. What a splendid diary he wrote [...]. He worked very hard and competently as his brother's secretary, dealing with a vast mass of correspondence, and it was enormous help. As they were so close, Warren could answer and deal with much of the correspondence alone without consulting his brother [...]. He was a man of great humility and the people I know who knew him, liked him very much. (Dorsett and Sayer)

Like all who knew him, I liked George Sayer very much. He was a genial and generous man. I had first met him at Wheaton College in 1978, when I thanked him for his 1952 home tape recordings of Tolkien reading from his works. I played these recordings for my Illinois Central College Tolkien class from its 1978 inception until my 2005 retirement and subsequently in the course I now teach at Bradley University. Due to CD technology, one can now hear the occasional lorry passing outside and the clink of glasses.

The recording came about because Lewis had loaned the typescript tale to Sayer, who with his wife Moira read it with enthusiastic admiration. He invited Tolkien over to Malvern to retrieve the manuscript and stay for a few days of hobbitish picnicking, pubbing, and gardening before Michaelmas term.

For evening amusement, Sayer produced a tape recorder, the first Tolkien had seen. After exorcising the machine by recording the Lord's Prayer in Gothic, he taped some of the book's poems.

"The more he recorded, the more he enjoyed recording," wrote Sayer. The riddle scene from *The Hobbit* followed.

"I then asked him to record what he thought one of the best pieces of prose in *The Lord of the Rings* and he recorded [the last] part of 'The Ride of the Rohirrim'."

"Surely you know that's really good," Sayer said. (Sayer, "Liner Notes")

Tolkien agreed. With Sayer's encouragement, he resubmitted it to publisher Rayner Unwin, who, in 1937 at age ten, had recommended *The Hobbit* for publication. Unwin believed *The Lord of the Rings* was a work of genius but uncertain of success. He risked it anyway, releasing it as three volumes not inexpensively priced 21 shillings each.

The rest is literary history. The beguiling power of this recording of Tolkien's reading is Sayer's great gift to spoken literature. Tolkien later bought a tape recorder of his own and used it to record his sequel to "The Battle of Maldon," "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son."

George and I next met at the Tolkien Centenary at Keble College, Oxford, in 1992. Walking back from posting a card home to my family, I encountered George, who had just delivered his memoir talk on Tolkien to the conferees, walking by himself on Parks Road. I said the friendliest greeting I know: "I very much enjoyed your talk. May I buy you a drink?" He assented with that unforgettably gracious smile and we crossed over to the Keble College bar. Only when we were nearly there did he say, "Oh! I forgot my wife!" But he added that she would know where to find him. Indeed she did. He bought me a pint after the one I'd bought him, then invited me to join them for dinner in the Keble dining hall. She and George were witty and well-matched. We exchanged addresses. I wrote in my journal: "A day to be marked with a white stone."

Two years later, when I visited Oxford with my wife Jo, I telephoned him from the Randolph Hotel. To my delighted surprise, he invited us over for dinner.

George picked us up at Malvern Link and gave us a tour of the town. We visited Malvern College, Malvern Priory, with its Green Man amid the saints' bas-reliefs, and a favorite Inklings pub, the Unicorn, whose overloud jukebox blaring "Respect" by Aretha Franklin forced us to exit unpinted. Sayer shared with Lewis, Tolkien, and all sensible people a dislike of jukeboxes in pubs.

At his home, across the road from the erstwhile estate of the "Pomp and Circumstance" composer Edward Elgar, he poured us *amontillado*, bade me sit down on the couch, and said, "That is just where Tolkien was sitting when I made those tapes you use in your Tolkien class."

He produced several books from Lewis's personal library. One was *Irene Iddesleigh*, the notoriously bad 1898 novel by Amanda McKittrick Ros. The Inklings sometimes amused themselves by seeing who could read from it longest without laughing at its lamentably florid and prolix prose. I lasted about one paragraph. Another was a collection of the poems of Coventry Patmore; Lewis's copious notes on the endpapers and in the text testified to his admiration of that now nigh-forgotten poet.

At lunch, the conversation with Margaret and him was catholic in the literal sense, beginning with the question of national health funding for artificial

insemination of lesbians in the UK armed forces and moving to Tom Bombadil as a nature god and the raising and butchering one’s own meat—they were vegetarians, we were not—to, of course, Tolkien and the Lewis brothers.

We shared admiration of W.H. Lewis’s writing and I will always cherish his recollections of Warnie. Especially poignant was Warnie’s refusal of Sayer’s offer to treat him to a first trip to Versailles, the focus of his brilliant French histories of the era of Louis XIV, the Sun King, because, as George recalled, the Major felt Versailles would not live up to his image of it. He spoke of his intention to write a biography of Warnie, which, regrettably, he never did.

At the end of that long, lively lunch—Margaret’s table was grand as Master Gorbodoc’s at Brandy Hall—I thanked him for his cordiality to a couple of Midwestern Yanks, and he said something unforgettable: “I don’t much like America, but I find that I do like Americans.”

The food and wines were superb, as they were again on our second visit two years later, when George gave me with some valuable insights on G.K. Chesterton’s influence on Tolkien.

In 1996, while working on a paper on that topic, I wrote Sayer asking if he had any recollections of Tolkien’s views on Chesterton. He responded that he could not think of anything at the moment. However, he continued, if we would once again visit him for lunch during our upcoming return to Oxford, perhaps “my memories will revive.” Indeed they did. Over sherry before lunch, Sayer first said he could not recall anything Tolkien said about Chesterton. “I’m afraid I rather brought you here under false pretenses,” he said. He added that Tolkien was typically less likely to praise other writers than Lewis was. Lewis, he said, “admired Chesterton immensely and often spoke of him. He owed a great deal to *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*. He thought there was some great poetry.”

Perhaps Tolkien did, too. Sayer’s revived memory revealed that Tolkien knew a number of the poems from Chesterton’s *The Flying Inn* by heart, including “The Song of the Quoodle,” “The Song against Grocers,” and the famous refrain, “The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.” Tolkien was also quite fond of reciting “The Battle of Lepanto,” a fact which Tolkien’s daughter Priscilla confirmed.

Both times we brought chocolates for dessert and the best bottle of French wine we could find at the Oddbins on the Broad in Oxford. We enjoyed the former together; they banked the latter in their thousand-bottle cellar.

We left on the train back to Oxford both times feeling that these, too, were indeed days to be marked with a white stone. So they have proved to be. The generosity, the cheer, and the lore and laughter we shared have warmed us with every recollection. He was, as Lewis said, a “most unselfish man.”

Although George wrote much more about Lewis than about Tolkien, his charming and cogent “Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien,” reprinted as the opening

essay in Joseph Pearce's 2001 collection *Tolkien: A Celebration*, is the paper he presented at the Tolkien Centenary. As an undergraduate, Sayer writes that had been encouraged to attend Tolkien's lectures by Lewis, who called Tolkien "an inspired speaker of footnotes" (2).

Sayer recalls walking trips with Tolkien and the Lewis brothers, describing the former's knowledge of historical lore about the flowers and herbs that the Lewises strode hastily past. A Catholic convert himself, he reveals that Tolkien thought "hatred of Catholics was common in Britain. [...] [H]is wife, Edith, was turned out of her guardian's house when she was received into the Church" (13).

Vignettes of Tolkien playing as Thomas the Tank Engine during Sayer's last visit with him round out this dulcet memoir: "This love for children and delight in childlike play was yet another thing that contributed to his wholeness as a man and the success of his books"; and "Without a liking for the homely and domestic, he could not have written *The Hobbit*, or invented Frodo or Sam Gamgee" (16).

George Sayer died Oct. 20, 2005, in Malvern. He was 91. After his death, Margaret Sayer wrote me:

Thank you for your kindly and warm letter of condolence and its tribute to George.

He was a very special person and I feel honored to have been married to him.

His last years were very sad. He had lost a great deal of his mind, and he was physically severely disabled. His final end was a merciful release.

Chris Mitchell and Marjorie Mead of Wheaton College's Wade Center had kept me informed of news of the Sayers since 1996, though it was I who broke the news of his passing to them on All Hallows' Eve morning, 2005. On All Saints' Day on the telephone, we shared both our grief at his death and our joy of having shared in his life.

Marj Mead wrote:

Since the earliest days of the Wade Center, George Sayer has been a very special friend to Wheaton College. But more than that, he and his wife Margaret have been dear personal friends, and it is difficult to say just how much I grieve his death. Because of George and Margaret's warm hospitality, Malvern became almost a second home for me and my family. George was a kind, generous and loving friend. We miss him very much.

Dr. Mitchell said:

It was my pleasure to be the recipient of George and Margaret Sayer’s hospitality on numerous occasions. My memories of the first weekend I stayed with them on Alexandra Street are still warm and vivid. Conversation was always enriching, often challenging, wonderfully peppered with humor and good fun, and full of affection. [...] On one particular sunny summer afternoon, George talked me through the reading syllabus Lewis had him work through during his student days at Oxford. A teacher of English literature himself, he took the liberty to supplement the list with his own suggestions. Those were hours [...] I will never forget.

The last time I saw George he was reading. Although he no longer remembered me, we talked of the book, admired the roses which grew outside his window, and enjoyed the thought of just being together. [It was a] final moment of privilege.

After 1996, I never saw him again. But I will never forget him. Although I was enriched by my acquaintance with him, I would have felt privileged only I had only ever met him through his writings and his lectures at Wheaton College and Oxford.

Besides articles collected in various works on Lewis and Tolkien, he will be best known and longest remembered for *Jack*. Perhaps Tolkien was right and no one will ever get to the bottom of C.S. Lewis. But of all the biographers, Sayer comes closest.

First student, then fellow Christian and fellow literature teacher, and most finally a friend, George Sayer shared this simple secret with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: Teaching and friendship are kindred forms of love.

We hope to recognize his voice and his smile when we next encounter him.

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