

The Dinosaur and the Critics: A. N. Wilson on C. S. Lewis

J. F. R. Day

C. S. Lewis: A Biography. A. N. Wilson. New York: Norton, 1990. 334 pages.

When C. S. Lewis died in 1963, his death went almost unnoticed, at least in this country, for it occurred on the same day that President Kennedy was shot in Texas. As if to make up for that neglect, there has emerged in recent years a growing industry of Lewis criticism, reminiscence, biography, and even hagiography. Writers like Humphrey Carpenter, Chad Walsh, and Walter Hooper, among others, as well as a scad of C. S. Lewis newsletters have contributed to the Lewis phenomenon, and now they are joined by A. N. Wilson, not only a celebrated biographer but also one of Britain's better-known novelists.

It is clear that one of Wilson's primary reasons for writing about Lewis is to demythologize the man — to find the "Jack Lewis," as he was invariably called, beneath the printed initials of a book cover. And there is a good deal to demythologize. Lewis was legendary, not only as a writer of children's books (the *Chronicles of Narnia*) and adult fantasies (such as *Perelandra*), but also as a formidable literary critic (*The Discarded Image*, *The Allegory of Love*), a brilliant Oxford (and later Cambridge) don, and undoubtedly the foremost popular apologist for Christianity in English since Chesterton. Furthermore, he was a voluminous correspondent who always answered his mail, a courtesy that is surely tantamount to sainthood these days. As a result, Lewis is in considerable danger of canonization from both the High Church and the Low, each frequently creating, as Wilson points out, rather different sorts of devotion — St. Jack the Virgin, the "catholic" saint, and St. Jack the Abstemious, the "protestant" one. Both views are clearly at odds with the facts. Wilson argues convincingly that Lewis was neither celibate nor teetotaler. In fact, Lewis's view of drink and tobacco was very much at odds with that of the religious right, and one may be absolutely sure that it was not ginger

beer that fueled his conversations at "The Bird and Baby." (Wilson also notes somewhat ironically that religious conservatives have virtually created a shrine to Lewis at Wheaton College, where his beer tankards and pipes are reverently displayed in glass cases for the edification of the faithful who are themselves discouraged from such amusements.) In short, whatever else C. S. Lewis may have been, he was very far from a plaster saint on anyone's altar. If Wilson spends more time on Lewis's involvement with "Minto" Moore and Joy Davidman than Lewis himself would have liked, it is, after all, only to be expected in a post-Freudian age. If, as Professor Stephen Sykes has pointed out, sanctity is impossible in a post-Freudian age, we have only ourselves to blame.

Wilson is at his best in describing the milieu Lewis inhabited—a milieu which Wilson, himself a former Oxford don, clearly understands and relishes. I have read few better accounts of what the tutorial system is actually like at Oxford, at least from a don's standpoint. Wilson also gives us a good picture of the much-publicized "Inklings," including Charles Williams and J. R. R. Tolkien, among the most famous. While Tolkien and Lewis's friendship was eventually to wane, Wilson argues that we owe the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* largely to Lewis's interest in the work. Tolkien, unfortunately, was less thrilled with Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, finding the "subcreation" of Lewis's world faulty. But if Wilson's accounts of Lewis among his friends are not quite as edifying as popular piety might prefer, yet there are still a number of people who found in that group some of the best conversation ever heard in a University, and for Oxford, that is quite a claim.

Wilson is perhaps a bit less enamored of Lewis's apologetic works. While he finds the pathos of *A Grief Observed*, written after the death of Lewis's wife, Joy Davidman, to be moving and genuine, some of the earlier works strike him as facile and even hectoring. Perhaps so, but Wilson's own criticism of Lewis's technique sometimes seems to miss the point a bit as well. Lewis was, in a very real sense, making debating points, and occasionally Wilson seems to want to take an analogy Lewis was making to demonstrate a particular point and reduce it to absurdity. When in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis tries to get across the idea of the Incarnation by asking how we would like to become slugs or crabs, Wilson objects that the analogy is offensive, since we did not make nor could we redeem crabs (181). This is undoubtedly true, but what Lewis was trying to approximate was not the Redemptive aspect of the Incarnation but the Kenotic one—the "emptying" of Christ in the Incarnation and the conde-

scension involved in God becoming man. (While Wilson may object to it, similar analogies have been used by Robert Farrar Capon, though he, as I recall, prefers frogs and oysters to crabs and slugs.) Wilson also objects to Lewis's major argument for the Divinity of Christ: Lewis argues that Christ's actually claiming to be Divine would make him, as a first-century Jew, either wicked, or mad, or, as He said He was, God. To this Wilson replies, quite correctly (as indeed with any historical document), we cannot know anything Jesus may have said. "You cannot, in isolation from church doctrine, and in isolation from the plain facts of literary history, say that Jesus said this thing or that thing. If you do, you find yourself faced with unedifying alternatives such as Lewis proposes" (165). Of course, it is precisely for that reason—to get his reader to "unedifying alternatives"—that Lewis makes his argument. It is a strong argument, and apparently Wilson's only cogent attack is to argue the insufficient clarity of scripture on the point, a view Lewis would heartily dispute. If Lewis takes scripture as a clearer witness than Wilson does, it is not wholly without reason; after all, Jesus surely said something to get Himself crucified and to inspire his followers to endure grisly deaths for His sake. It does not seem that Lewis is any less logical to follow the Gospel accounts, varied as they may be, than Wilson is to question them. While Wilson notes that Lewis was ignorant of Biblical criticism, it is only fair to remember that Lewis was not an unsophisticated reader of ancient texts—a point Lewis makes himself in "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism" in *Christian Reflections*. Of course, Lewis did make mistakes. He did even occasionally get flat caught out, as with Elizabeth Anscombe over the third chapter of Lewis's *Miracles* (210 ff.). But all in all, Wilson's treatment of Lewis as an apologist reminds me of a Rhodes scholar I knew who was told by his philosophy don that you underestimate Lewis's logic at your peril rather than Lewis's.

But this is a minor criticism of an interesting book, for in the areas of Lewis's fantasy works and his criticism, Wilson is insightful and well-worth reading. If it were only for Lewis's *Oxford History of English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, he would be one of the best—and most readable—critics around. Wilson's discussion of this, and other critical works, is excellent. He puts *An Experiment in Criticism* clearly in context as Lewis's answer to the new critical theories of F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richard, and when Lewis points out "[i]t is always better to read Chaucer again than to read a new criticism of him," Wilson agrees. "This seems like common sense today..." (289). One only wishes that it did. Lewis, the self-

proclaimed "Dinosaur" of letters would find as much to displease him in recent critics as he did in those of his own day. Not, it would seem from the results of Lewis's own approach to literature, without reason.

While there are any number of things in Wilson's biography of Lewis that Lewis fans will find troublesome or annoying, in bulk this is a remarkably interesting biography of a fascinating man. At the end of his foreword, Wilson argues that his work "is not intended to be iconoclastic, but I will try to be realistic, not only because reality is more interesting than fantasy, but also because we do Lewis no honour to make him into a plaster saint. And he deserves our honour." That C. S. Lewis certainly does. ♣