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# C.S. LEWIS

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A LIFE

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ALISTER McGRATH

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**MICHAEL WARD**

Author of *Planet Narnia*

**ECCENTRIC GENIUS. RELUCTANT PROPHET.**

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*C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*

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# Contents

**List of Illustrations** *ix*

**Preface** *x*

## **PART 1: PRELUDE**

- Chapter 1      The Soft Hills of Down:  
An Irish Childhood, 1898–1908**    *3*
- The Lewis Family    *4*
- The Ambivalent Irishman: The Enigma of Irish Cultural Identity    *9*
- Surrounded by Books: Hints of a Literary Vocation    *14*
- Solitude: Warnie Goes to England    *16*
- First Encounters with Joy    *18*
- The Death of Flora Lewis    *20*
- Chapter 2      The Ugly Country of England:  
Schooldays, 1908–1917**    *25*
- Wynyard School, Watford: 1908–1910    *27*
- Cherbourg School, Malvern: 1911–1913    *28*
- Malvern College: 1913–1914    *31*
- Bookham and the “Great Knock”: 1914–1917    *37*
- The Threat of Conscription    *43*
- Lewis’s Application to Oxford University    *44*
- Chapter 3      The Vasty Fields of France: War, 1917–1918**    *49*
- The Curious Case of the Unimportant War    *49*
- Arrival at Oxford: April 1917    *52*
- The Officer Cadet at Keble College    *55*
- Lewis’s Wartime Experiences at Oxford    *61*
- Deployment to France: November 1917    *67*
- Wounded in Battle: The Assault on Riez du Vinage, April 1918    *70*
- Lewis and Mrs. Moore: An Emerging Relationship    *73*



## PART 2: OXFORD

- Chapter 4      Deceptions and Discoveries:  
The Making of an Oxford Don, 1919–1927 79**  
The Student of Classics: University College, 1919 80  
Albert Lewis's Concerns about His Son 84  
Academic Distinction: The Chancellor's Essay Prize, 1921 86  
Success and Failure: Academic Distinction and Unemployment 88  
Mrs. Moore: The Cornerstone of Lewis's Life 95  
The Student of English Language and Literature, 1922–1923 98  
The Fellowship at Magdalen College 108
- Chapter 5      Fellowship, Family, and Friendship:  
The Early Years at Magdalen College, 1927–1930 113**  
Fellowship: Magdalen College 113  
Family Rupture: The Death of Albert Lewis 118  
The Lingering Influence of Albert Lewis 122  
Family Reconnection: Warnie Moves to Oxford 124  
Friendship: J. R. R. Tolkien 127
- Chapter 6      The Most Reluctant Convert:  
The Making of a Mere Christian, 1930–1932 131**  
The English Literary Religious Renaissance of the 1920s 131  
The Realising Imagination: Lewis's Rediscovery of God 135  
The Date of Lewis's Conversion: A Reconsideration 141  
A Nighttime Conversation with Tolkien: September 1931 146  
Lewis's Belief in the Divinity of Christ 151
- Chapter 7      A Man of Letters:  
Literary Scholarship and Criticism, 1933–1939 161**  
Lewis the Teacher: Oxford Tutorials 162  
Lewis the Teacher: Oxford Lectures 166  
*The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933): Mapping the Landscape of Faith 169  
The Inklings: Friendship, Community, and Debate 175  
*The Allegory of Love* (1936) 182  
Lewis on the Place and Purpose of Literature 186
- Chapter 8      National Acclaim:  
The Wartime Apologist, 1939–1942 191**  
Lewis's Friendship with Charles Williams 194  
Lewis the Literary Midwife: Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* 197

*The Problem of Pain* (1940) 200  
Lewis's Wartime Broadcast Talks 205

**Chapter 9      International Fame:  
The Mere Christian, 1942–1945 215**

*The Screwtape Letters* (1942) 216  
*Mere Christianity* (1952) 218  
Other Wartime Projects 229  
The Shift to Fiction: The Ransom Trilogy 233

**Chapter 10     A Prophet without Honour?:  
Postwar Tensions and Problems, 1945–1954 239**

C. S. Lewis—Superstar 239  
The Darker Side of Fame 242  
Dementia and Alcoholism: Lewis's "Mother" and Brother 245  
Hostility towards Lewis at Oxford 247  
Elizabeth Anscombe and the Socratic Club 250  
Lewis's Doubts about His Role as an Apologist 258

## **PART 3: NARNIA**

**Chapter 11     Rearranging Reality: The Creation of Narnia 263**

The Origins of Narnia 265  
The Threshold: A Key Narnian Theme 269  
The Reading Order of the Narnia Series 272  
Animals in Narnia 275  
Narnia as a Window on Reality 277  
Narnia and the Retelling of the Grand Narrative 279

**Chapter 12     Narnia: Exploring an Imaginative World 285**

Aslan: The Heart's Desire 287  
The Deeper Magic: Atonement in Narnia 292  
The Seven Planets: Medieval Symbolism in Narnia 296  
The Shadowlands: Reworking Plato's Cave 300  
The Problem of the Past in Narnia 303

## **PART 4: CAMBRIDGE**

**Chapter 13     The Move to Cambridge:  
Magdalene College, 1954–1960 309**

The New Cambridge Chair 310  
Renaissance: The Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge 315



A Literary Romance: Enter Joy Davidman 320  
The “Very Strange Marriage” to Joy Davidman 329  
The Death of Joy Davidman 334

**Chapter 14    Bereavement, Illness, and Death:  
The Final Years, 1960–1963 341**

*A Grief Observed* (1961): The Testing of Faith 342  
Lewis’s Failing Health, 1961–1962 348  
Final Illness and Death 354

**PART 5: AFTERLIFE**

**Chapter 15    The Lewis Phenomenon 363**

The 1960s: A Fading Star 363  
Rediscovery: The New Interest in Lewis 367  
Lewis and American Evangelicals 371  
Lewis as a Literary Landmark 376  
Conclusion 378

**Timeline 381**

**Acknowledgements 387**

**Works Consulted 391**

**Notes 403**

**Index 428**

# List of Illustrations

- 1.1 Royal Avenue, Belfast, in 1897 6
- 1.2 Map of C. S. Lewis's Ireland 11
- 1.3 The Lewis family at Little Lea in 1905 15
- 1.4 Pension le Petit Vallon, Berneval-le-Grand, around 1905 21
- 1.5 C. S. Lewis and Warnie with their bicycles in August 1908 23
- 2.1 William Thompson Kirkpatrick (1848–1921) in 1920 32
- 2.2 C. S. Lewis and Arthur Greeves in 1910 36
- 2.3 Lord Kitchener: "Your country needs you!" 38
- 2.4 Station Road, Great Bookham, in 1924 39
- 3.1 The undergraduates of University College, Trinity Term 1917 53
- 3.2 Keble College, Oxford, in 1907 57
- 3.3 C. S. Lewis and Paddy Moore in Oxford during the summer of 1917 59
- 4.1 Radcliffe Quadrangle, University College, in 1917 81
- 4.2 The Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, in 1922 87
- 4.3 Cornmarket Street, Oxford, in 1922 89
- 4.4 "The Family": C. S. Lewis, Maureen, and Mrs. Moore in 1927 97
- 4.5 Magdalen College, Oxford, during the winter of 1910 110
- 5.1 The president and fellows of Magdalen College, July 1928 115
- 5.2 The New Building, Magdalen College, around 1925 117
- 5.3 The last known photograph of Albert Lewis, 1928 119
- 5.4 C. S. Lewis, Mrs. Moore, and Warnie at The Kilns in 1930 126
- 5.5 J. R. R. Tolkien in his rooms at Merton College in the 1970s 128
- 6.1 The interior of Magdalen College chapel, around 1927 145
- 6.2 Addison's Walk, Magdalen College, in 1937 148
- 6.3 Holy Trinity Church, Headington Quarry, Oxford, in 1901 157
- 7.1 The Examination Schools, Oxford University, in 1892 168
- 7.2 A group of Inklings at The Trout, Godstow, near Oxford 180
- 7.3 Duke Humfrey's Library, Oxford, in 1902 182
- 8.1 The Oxford Home Guard on parade in 1940 193
- 8.2 The novelist and poet Charles Williams (1886–1945) 195
- 8.3 Broadcasting House, London, around 1950 211
- 10.1 C. S. Lewis and his brother, Warnie, on holiday in Ireland, 1949 257
- 11.1 Mr. Tumnus carrying an umbrella and parcels through a snowy wood 265
- 11.2 The four children discover the mysterious wardrobe 268
- 12.1 Pauline Baynes's "Map of Narnia" 286
- 13.1 Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1955 315
- 13.2 Joy Davidman Lewis in 1960 327
- 13.3 Peter Bide in November 1960 338
- 14.1 The Acland Nursing Home, Oxford, in 1900 349
- 14.2 C. S. Lewis's letter nominating J. R. R. Tolkien for the 1961 Nobel Prize  
in Literature 351
- 14.3 The inscription on C. S. Lewis's gravestone 359
- 15.1 C. S. Lewis at home at The Kilns in 1960 364

# Preface

Who is C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)? For many, probably most, Lewis is the creator of the fabulous world of Narnia, the author of some of the best-known and most discussed children’s books of the twentieth century, which continue to attract enthusiastic readers and sell in the millions. Fifty years after his death, Lewis remains one of the most influential popular writers of our age. Alongside his equally famous Oxford colleague and friend J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973), author of *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis is widely seen as a literary and cultural landmark. The worlds of literature and cinema have been deeply shaped by both of these Oxford authors. Yet without Lewis, *The Lord of the Rings* might never have been written. Lewis may have created his own bestsellers, but he was also midwife to Tolkien’s masterpiece, even proposing Tolkien for the 1961 Nobel Prize in Literature on the basis of this epic work. For these reasons alone, the story of C. S. Lewis is worth telling.

But there is far more to C. S. Lewis than this. As Lewis’s long-term friend Owen Barfield (1898–1997) once remarked, there were really three C. S. Lewises. Alongside Lewis the author of bestselling novels, there is a second, less well-known persona: Lewis the Christian writer and apologist, concerned to communicate and share his rich vision of the intellectual and imaginative power of the Christian faith—a faith he discovered in the middle of his life and found rationally and spiritually compelling.

Much to the annoyance of some, his *Mere Christianity* is now often cited as the most influential religious work of the twentieth century.

Perhaps on account of his very public commitment to Christianity, Lewis remains a controversial figure, who elicits affection and admiration from some of those who share his delight in the Christian faith, and ridicule and contempt from some of those who do not. Yet whether one thinks Christianity is good or bad, it is clearly *important*—and Lewis is perhaps the most credible and influential popular representative of the “mere Christianity” that he himself championed.

Yet there is a third aspect to Lewis, perhaps the least familiar to most of his admirers and critics: the distinguished Oxford don and literary critic who packed lecture theatres with his unscripted reflections on English literature, and who went on to become the first occupant of the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the University of Cambridge. Few might now read his *Preface to “Paradise Lost”* (1942); in its day, however, it set a new standard through its clarity and insight.

Lewis’s professional calling was to the “groves of Academe.” His election as a fellow of the British Academy in July 1955 was a public demonstration of his high scholarly repute. Yet some in the academic world regarded his commercial and popular success as being inconsistent with any claim on his part to be a serious scholar. From 1942 onwards, Lewis struggled to maintain his academic credibility in the light of his more popular works, above all his lighthearted musings on the diabolical world of Screwtape.

So how do these three Lewises relate to each other? Are they separate compartments of his life, or are they somehow interconnected? And how did they each develop? This book aims to tell the story of the shaping and expressing of Lewis’s mind, focussing on his writings. It is not concerned with documenting every aspect of Lewis’s life, but with exploring the complex and fascinating connections between Lewis’s external and internal worlds. This biography is thus organised around the real and imaginary worlds that Lewis inhabited—primarily Oxford, Cambridge, and Narnia. How does the development of his ideas and his imagination map onto the physical worlds he inhabited? Who helped him craft his intellectual and imaginative vision of reality?

In our discussion, we shall consider Lewis's rise to fame, and some of the factors that lay behind this. Yet it is one thing for Lewis to have become famous; it is another for him to remain so fifty years after his death. Many commentators back in the 1960s believed that Lewis's fame was transitory. His inevitable decline into obscurity, many then believed, was just a matter of time—a decade at most. It is for this reason that the final chapter of this work tries to explain, not simply why Lewis became such a figure of authority and influence, but why he remains so today.

Some of the more important early biographies were written by those who knew Lewis personally. These continue to be invaluable as descriptions of what Lewis was *like* as a human being, as well as offering some important judgements concerning his character. However, the vast scholarly endeavours of the last two decades have clarified questions of historical importance (such as Lewis's role in the Great War), explored aspects of Lewis's intellectual development, and provided critical readings of his major works. This biography tries to weave these strands together, presenting an understanding of Lewis firmly grounded in earlier studies, yet able to go beyond them.

Any attempt to deal with Lewis's rise to prominence has to acknowledge his misgivings about assuming a public role. Lewis was indeed a prophet to his own day and age, and beyond; yet it must be said that he was a *reluctant* prophet. Even his own conversion seemed to take place against his better judgement; and having been converted to Christianity, Lewis spoke out on its themes largely because of the silence or unintelligibility of those he believed were better placed than he was to engage religious and theological questions publicly.

Lewis also comes across as something of an eccentric, in the proper sense of that term—someone who departs from recognised, conventional, or established norms or patterns, or who is displaced from the centre of things. His curious relationship with Mrs. Moore, to be discussed in some detail in this work, placed him well outside the British social norms of the 1920s. Many of Lewis's academic colleagues at Oxford came to regard him as an outsider from about 1940, both on account of his openly Christian views and his unscholarly habit of writing popular works of fiction and apologetics. Lewis famously described his distance from the

prevailing academic trends of his day when he referred to himself as a “dinosaur” in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge University in 1954.

This sense of distance from the centre is also evident in Lewis’s religious life. Although Lewis became a highly influential voice within British Christianity, he operated from its margins rather than its centre, and had no time for the cultivation of relationships with leading figures of the religious establishment. It was perhaps this trait that endeared him to some in the media, anxious to find an authentic religious voice outside the power structures of the mainstream churches.

This biography sets out, not to praise Lewis or condemn him, but to *understand* him—above all, his ideas, and how these found expression in his writings. This task has been made easier by the publication of virtually all that is known to remain of Lewis’s writings, as well as a significant body of critical scholarly literature dealing with his works and ideas.

The vast amount of biographical and scholarly material now available concerning Lewis and his circle threatens to overwhelm the reader with fine detail. Those trying to make sense of Lewis find themselves bombarded with what the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) called “a meteoric shower of facts,” raining from the sky.<sup>1</sup> How, she asked, might these be combined to disclose meaning, rather than remaining a mere accumulation of information? This biography adds to what is known about Lewis’s life, while also trying to make sense of it. How are these facts to be woven together, so that they may disclose a pattern? This biography of Lewis is not another rehearsal of the vast army of facts and figures concerning his life, but an attempt to identify its deeper themes and concerns, and assess its significance. This is not a work of synopsis, but of analysis.

The publication of the collected letters of C. S. Lewis, carefully annotated and cross-referenced by Walter Hooper during the period 2000–2006, is of landmark importance for Lewis studies. These letters, taking up some 3,500 pages of text, offer insights into Lewis that were simply not available to an earlier generation of Lewis biographers. Perhaps most important, they provide a continuous narrative backbone for an account of Lewis’s life. For this reason, these letters are cited more than any other source throughout this biography. As will become clear, a close reading of

these letters forces review and possibly revision of some widely accepted dates in Lewis's life.

This is a critical biography, which examines the evidence for existing assumptions and approaches, and corrects them where necessary. In most cases, this can be done simply and subtly, and I have seen no reason to draw attention to those corrections. On the other hand, it is only fair to tell readers from the outset that this wearying yet necessary process of checking everything against documentary evidence has led me to one conclusion in particular that pits me, not simply against every Lewis scholar I know, but against Lewis himself. I refer to the date of his "conversion" or recovery of belief in God, which Lewis himself, in his book *Surprised by Joy* (1955), locates in "Trinity Term 1929" (that is, at some point between 28 April and 22 June 1929).<sup>2</sup>

This date is faithfully repeated in every major study of Lewis to have appeared recently. Yet my close reading of the documentary material points unequivocally to a later date, possibly as early as March 1930, but more likely in the Trinity Term of that year. On this point, I stand entirely alone in Lewis scholarship, and the reader has a right to know that I am completely isolated on this question.



From what has been said already, it will be clear that there is no need to justify a new biography of Lewis to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1963. Yet perhaps there is a need to offer a small defence of myself as his biographer. Unlike his earlier biographers—such as his longtime friends George Sayer (1914–2005) and Roger Lancelyn Green (1918–1987)—I never knew Lewis personally. He was someone I discovered through his writings in my early twenties, a decade after his death, and who, over a period of twenty years, gradually came to win my respect and admiration, though mingled with continuing curiosity and abiding concerns. I have no illuminating memories, no privileged disclosures, and no private documents on which to draw. Every resource used in this biography is either already in the public domain or available to public scrutiny and inspection.



This is a book written by someone who discovered Lewis through his writings, for others who have come to know Lewis in the same way. The Lewis I have come to know is mediated through his words, not through any personal acquaintance. Where other biographers refer to Lewis as “Jack” in their works, I have felt it right to call him “Lewis” throughout, mainly to emphasise my personal and critical distance from him. I believe that this is the Lewis whom he himself would wish future generations to know.

Why so? As Lewis emphasised throughout the 1930s, the important thing about authors is the *texts* that they write. What really matters is what those texts themselves say. Authors should not themselves be a “spectacle”; they are rather the “set of spectacles” through which we as readers see ourselves, the world, and the greater scheme of things of which we are a part. Lewis thus had surprisingly little interest in the personal history of the great English poet John Milton (1608–1674), or the political and social context within which he wrote. What really mattered were Milton’s writings—his *ideas*. The way Lewis believed we should approach Milton must be allowed to shape the way we in turn approach Lewis. Throughout this work, wherever possible, I have tried to engage with his writings, exploring what they say, and assessing their significance.

Though I did not know Lewis as a person, I can relate well—perhaps better than most—to at least some aspects of Lewis’s worlds. Like Lewis, I spent my childhood in Ireland, mainly in Downpatrick, the county town of County Down, whose “long, soft hills” Lewis knew and loved, and described so beautifully. I have walked where he walked, paused where he paused, and marvelled where he marvelled. I, too, felt that twinge of yearning at seeing the distant blue Mountains of Mourne from my childhood home. Like Lewis’s mother, Flora, I also was a pupil at the Methodist College, Belfast.

I also know Lewis’s Oxford well, having been a student there for seven years, before—after a brief spell at Lewis’s other university, Cambridge—returning to teach and write there for twenty-five years, ending up as Oxford University’s chair in historical theology, as well as becoming what Oxford calls a “Head of House.” Like Lewis, I was an atheist as a younger man, before discovering the intellectual riches of the Christian faith. Like Lewis, I chose to express and enact that faith in the specific form found

in the Church of England. And finally, as someone who is often called upon to offer a public defence of the Christian faith against its critics, I find myself both appreciating and using Lewis's ideas and approaches, many—but not all—of which seem to me to retain at least something of their sparkle and power.



Finally, a word about the method used in writing this biography. The core research began with a close reading of Lewis's entire published output (including his letters) in strictly chronological order of writing, so that the development of his thought and writing style could be appreciated. *The Pilgrim's Regress* was thus assigned to August 1932, when it was written, rather than May 1933, when it was published. This process of intense engagement with primary sources, which took fifteen months, was followed by a reading—in some cases a somewhat critical rereading—of the substantial secondary literature concerning Lewis, his circle of friends, and the intellectual and cultural context in which they lived, thought, and wrote. Finally, I examined unpublished archive material, much of which is held in Oxford, which casts further light on the shaping of Lewis's mind and on the intellectual and institutional context within which he worked.

It became clear at an early stage that a more academic study would be necessary to engage some of the scholarly questions that emerged from this detailed research. This biography avoids such details of scholarly engagement; notes and bibliography have been kept to the bare minimum. My concern in this volume is to tell a story, not to settle occasionally arcane and invariably detailed academic debates. Readers may, however, like to know that a more academic volume will be published shortly, offering scholarly exploration and justification of some of the assertions and conclusions of this biography.<sup>3</sup>

But enough of apologies and preliminaries. Our story begins in a world of long ago and far away—the Irish city of Belfast in the 1890s.

*Alister E. McGrath*  
London

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PART 1

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# PRELUDE

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## THE SOFT HILLS OF DOWN: AN IRISH CHILDHOOD

“I was born in the winter of 1898 at Belfast, the son of a solicitor and of a clergyman’s daughter.”<sup>1</sup> On 29 November 1898, Clive Staples Lewis was plunged into a world that was simmering with political and social resentment and clamouring for change. The partition of Ireland into Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was still two decades away. Yet the tensions that would lead to this artificial political division of the island were obvious to all. Lewis was born into the heart of the Protestant establishment of Ireland (the “Ascendancy”) at a time when every one of its aspects—political, social, religious, and cultural—was under threat.

Ireland was colonised by English and Scottish settlers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, leading to deep political and social resentment on the part of the dispossessed native Irish towards the incomers. The Protestant colonists were linguistically and religiously distinct from the native Catholic Irish. Under Oliver Cromwell, “Protestant plantations” developed during the seventeenth century—English Protestant islands in an Irish Catholic sea. The native Irish ruling classes were quickly displaced by a new Protestant establishment. The 1800 Act of Union saw Ireland become part of the United Kingdom, ruled directly from London. Despite being a numerical minority, located primarily in the northern counties

of Down and Antrim, including the industrial city of Belfast, Protestants dominated the cultural, economic, and political life of Ireland.

Yet all this was about to change. In the 1880s, Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–1891) and others began to agitate for “Home Rule” for Ireland. In the 1890s, Irish nationalism began to gain momentum, creating a sense of Irish cultural identity that gave new energy to the Home Rule movement. This was strongly shaped by Catholicism, and was vigorously opposed to all forms of English influence in Ireland, including games such as rugby and cricket. More significantly, it came to consider the English language as an agent of cultural oppression. In 1893 the Gaelic League (*Conradh na Gaeilge*) was founded to promote the study and use of the Irish language. Once more, this was seen as an assertion of Irish identity over and against what were increasingly regarded as alien English cultural norms.

As demands for Home Rule for Ireland became increasingly forceful and credible, many Protestants felt threatened, fearing the erosion of privilege and the possibility of civil strife. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Protestant community in Belfast in the early 1900s was strongly insular, avoiding social and professional contact with their Catholic neighbours wherever possible. (C. S. Lewis’s older brother, Warren [“Warnie”], later recalled that he never spoke to a Catholic from his own social background until he entered the Royal Military College at Sandhurst in 1914.)<sup>2</sup> Catholicism was “the Other”—something that was strange, incomprehensible, and above all *threatening*. Lewis absorbed such hostility towards—and isolation from—Catholicism with his mother’s milk. When the young Lewis was being toilet trained, his Protestant nanny used to call his stools “wee popes.” Many regarded, and still regard, Lewis as lying outside the pale of true Irish cultural identity on account of his Ulster Protestant roots.

## THE LEWIS FAMILY

The 1901 Census of Ireland recorded the names of everyone who “slept or abode” at the Lewis household in East Belfast on the night of Sunday, 31 March 1901. The record included a mass of personal details—relation-

ship to one another, religion, level of education, age, sex, rank or occupation, and place of birth. Although most biographies refer to the Lewis household as then residing at “47 Dundela Avenue,” the Census records them as living at “House 21 in Dundella [sic] Avenue (Victoria, Down).” The entry for the Lewis household provides an accurate snapshot of the family at the opening of the twentieth century:

Albert James Lewis, Head of Family, Church of Ireland, Read & Write, 37, M, Solicitor, Married, City of Cork  
Florence Augusta Lewis, Wife, Church of Ireland, Read & Write, 38, F, Married, County Cork  
Warren Hamilton Lewis, Son, Church of Ireland, Read, 5, M, Scholar, City of Belfast  
Clive Staples Lewis, Son, Church of Ireland, Cannot Read, 2, M, City of Belfast  
Martha Barber, Servant, Presbyterian, Read & Write, 28, F, Nurse—Domestic Servant, Not Married, County Monaghan  
Sarah Ann Conlon, Servant, Roman Catholic, Read & Write, 22, F, Cook—Domestic Servant, Not Married, County Down<sup>3</sup>

As the Census entry indicates, Lewis’s father, Albert James Lewis (1863–1929), was born in the city and county of Cork, in the south of Ireland. Lewis’s paternal grandfather, Richard Lewis, was a Welsh boilermaker who had immigrated to Cork with his Liverpool wife in the early 1850s. Soon after Albert’s birth, the Lewis family moved to the northern industrial city of Belfast, so that Richard could go into partnership with John H. MacIlwaine to form the successful firm MacIlwaine, Lewis & Co., Engineers and Iron Ship Builders. Perhaps the most interesting ship to be built by this small company was the original *Titanic*—a small steel freight steamer built in 1888, weighing a mere 1,608 tons.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the Belfast shipbuilding industry was undergoing change in the 1880s, with the larger yards of Harland and Wolff and Workman Clark achieving commercial dominance. It became increasingly difficult for



the “wee yards” to survive economically. In 1894, Workman Clark took over MacIlwaine, Lewis & Co. The rather more famous version of the *Titanic*—also built in Belfast—was launched in 1911 from the shipyard of Harland and Wolff, weighing 26,000 tons. Yet while Harland and Wolff’s liner famously sank on its maiden voyage in 1912, MacIlwaine and Lewis’s much smaller ship continued to ply its trade in South American waters under other names until 1928.



1.1 Royal Avenue, one of the commercial hubs of the city of Belfast, in 1897. Albert Lewis established his solicitor’s practice at 83 Royal Avenue in 1884, and continued working from these offices until his final illness in 1929.

Albert showed little interest in the shipbuilding business, and made it clear to his parents that he wanted to pursue a legal career. Richard Lewis, knowing of the excellent reputation of Lurgan College under its headmaster, William Thompson Kirkpatrick (1848–1921), decided to enrol Albert there as a boarding pupil.<sup>5</sup> Albert formed a lasting impression of Kirkpatrick’s teaching skills during his year there. After Albert graduated in 1880, he moved to Dublin, the capital city of Ireland, where he worked for five years for the firm of Maclean, Boyle, and Maclean. Having gained

the necessary experience and professional accreditation as a solicitor, he moved back to Belfast in 1884 to establish his own practice with offices on Belfast's prestigious Royal Avenue.

The Supreme Court of Judicature (Ireland) Act of 1877 followed the English practice of making a clear distinction between the legal role of "solicitors" and "barristers," so that aspiring Irish lawyers were required to decide which professional position they wished to pursue. Albert Lewis chose to become a solicitor, acting directly on behalf of clients, including representing them in the lower courts. A barrister specialised in courtroom advocacy, and would be hired by a solicitor to represent a client in the higher courts.<sup>6</sup>

Lewis's mother, Florence ("Flora") Augusta Lewis (1862-1908), was born in Queenstown (now Cobh), County Cork. Lewis's maternal grandfather, Thomas Hamilton (1826-1905), was a Church of Ireland clergyman—a classic representative of the Protestant Ascendancy that came under threat as Irish nationalism became an increasingly significant and cultural force in the early twentieth century. The Church of Ireland had been the established church throughout Ireland, despite being a minority faith in at least twenty-two of the twenty-six Irish counties. When Flora was eight, her father accepted the post of chaplain to Holy Trinity Church in Rome, where the family lived from 1870 to 1874.

In 1874, Thomas Hamilton returned to Ireland to take up the position of curate-in-charge of Dundela Church in the Ballyhackamore area of East Belfast. The same temporary building served as a church on Sundays and a school during weekdays. It soon became clear that a more permanent arrangement was required. Work soon began on a new, purpose-built church, designed by the famous English ecclesiastical architect William Butterfield. Hamilton was installed as rector of the newly built parish church of St. Mark's, Dundela, in May 1879.

Irish historians now regularly point to Flora Hamilton as illustrating the increasingly significant role of women in Irish academic and cultural life in the final quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> She was enrolled as a day pupil at the Methodist College, Belfast—an all-boys school, founded

in 1865, at which “Ladies’ Classes” had been established in response to popular demand in 1869.<sup>8</sup> She attended for one term in 1881, and went on to study at the Royal University of Ireland in Belfast (now Queen’s University, Belfast), gaining First Class Honours in Logic and Second Class Honours in Mathematics in 1886.<sup>9</sup> (As will become clear, Lewis failed to inherit anything of his mother’s gift for mathematics.)

When Albert Lewis began to attend St. Mark’s, Dundela, his eye was caught by the rector’s daughter. Slowly but surely, Flora appears to have been drawn to Albert, partly on account of his obvious literary interests. Albert had joined the Belmont Literary Society in 1881, and was soon considered one of its best speakers. His reputation as a man of literary inclinations would remain with him for the rest of his life. In 1921, at the height of Albert Lewis’s career as a solicitor, *Ireland’s Saturday Night* newspaper featured him in a cartoon. Dressed in the garb of a court solicitor of the period, he is depicted as holding a mortarboard under one arm and a volume of English literature under the other. Years later, Albert Lewis’s obituary in the *Belfast Telegraph* described him as a “well read and erudite man,” noted for literary allusions in his presentations in court, and who “found his chief recreation away from the courts of law in reading.”<sup>10</sup>

After a suitably decorous and extended courtship, Albert and Flora were married on 29 August 1894 at St. Mark’s Church, Dundela. Their first child, Warren Hamilton Lewis, was born on 16 June 1895 at their home, “Dundela Villas,” in East Belfast. Clive was their second and final child. The Census return of 1901 indicates that the Lewis household then had two servants. Unusual for a Protestant family, the Lewises employed a Catholic housemaid, Sarah Ann Conlon. Lewis’s long-standing aversion to religious sectarianism—evident in his notion of “mere Christianity”—may have received a stimulus from memories of his childhood.

From the outset, Lewis developed a close relationship with his elder brother, Warren, which was reflected in their nicknames for each other. C. S. Lewis was “Smallpigiebotham” (SPB) and Warnie “Archpigiebotham” (APB), affectionate names inspired by their childhood nurse’s frequent (and apparently real) threats to smack their “piggybottoms” unless they

behaved properly. The brothers referred to their father as the “Pudaitabird” or “P’dayta” (because of his Belfast pronunciation of *potato*). These childhood nicknames would become important once more as the brothers reconnected and reestablished their intimacy in the late 1920s.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis himself was known as “Jack” to his family and friends. Warnie dates his brother’s rejection of the name *Clive* to a summer holiday in 1903 or 1904, when Lewis suddenly declared that he now wished to be known as “Jacksie.” This was gradually abbreviated to “Jacks,” and finally to “Jack.”<sup>12</sup> The reason for this choice of name remains obscure. Although some sources suggest that the name “Jacksie” was taken from a family dog that died in an accident, there is no documentary evidence in support of this.

### THE AMBIVALENT IRISHMAN: THE ENIGMA OF IRISH CULTURAL IDENTITY

Lewis was Irish—something that some Irish seem to have forgotten, if they knew it at all. While I myself was growing up in Northern Ireland during the 1960s, my recollection is that when Lewis was referred to at all, it was as an “English” writer. Yet Lewis never lost sight of his Irish roots. The sights, sounds, and fragrances—not, on the whole, the *people*—of his native Ireland evoked nostalgia for the later Lewis, just as they subtly but powerfully moulded his descriptive prose. In a letter of 1915, Lewis fondly recalls his memories of Belfast: “the distant murmuring of the ‘yards,’” the broad sweep of Belfast Lough, the Cave Hill Mountain, and the little glens, meadows, and hills around the city.<sup>13</sup>

Yet there is more to Lewis’s Ireland than its “soft hills.” Its culture was marked by a passion for storytelling, evident both in its mythology and its historical narratives, and in its love of language. Yet Lewis never made his Irish roots into a fetish. They were simply part of who he was, not his defining feature. As late as the 1950s, Lewis regularly spoke of Ireland as his “home,” calling it “my country,” even choosing to spend his belated honeymoon with Joy Davidman there in April 1958. Lewis had inhaled the soft, moist air of his homeland, and never forgot its natural beauty.

Few who know County Down can fail to recognise the veiled Irish originals which may have inspired some of Lewis’s beautifully crafted literary landscapes. Lewis’s depiction of heaven in *The Great Divorce* as an “emerald green” land echoes his native country, just as the dolmens at Legananny in County Down, Belfast’s Cave Hill Mountain, and the Giant’s Causeway all seem to have their Narnian equivalents—perhaps softer and brighter than their originals, but still bearing something of their imprint.

Lewis frequently referred to Ireland as a source of literary inspiration, noting how its landscapes were a powerful stimulus to the imagination. Lewis disliked Irish politics and was prone to imagine a pastoral Ireland composed solely of soft hills, mists, loughs, and woods. Ulster, he once confided to his diary, “is very beautiful and if only I could deport the Ulstermen and fill their land with a populace of my own choosing, I should ask for no better place to live in.”<sup>14</sup> (In certain ways, Narnia can be seen as an imaginary and idealised Ulster, populated with creatures of Lewis’s imagination, rather than Ulstermen.)

The term *Ulster* needs further explanation. Just as the English county of Yorkshire was divided into three parts (the “Ridings,” from the Old Norse word for “a third part,” *thrithjungr*), the island of Ireland was originally divided into five regions (Gaelic *cúigí*, from *cóiced*, “a fifth part”). After the Norman conquest of 1066, these were reduced to four: Connaught, Leinster, Munster, and Ulster. The term *province* now came to be preferred to the Gaelic *cúige*. The Protestant minority in Ireland was concentrated in the northern province of Ulster, which consisted of nine counties. When Ireland was partitioned, six of these nine counties formed the new political entity of Northern Ireland. The term *Ulster* is today often used as synonymous with Northern Ireland, with the term *Ulsterman* tending to be used—though not consistently—to designate “a Protestant inhabitant of Northern Ireland.” This is done despite the fact that the original *cúige* of Ulster also included the three counties of Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan, now part of the Republic of Ireland.



1.2 C. S. Lewis's Ireland.

Lewis returned to Ireland for his annual vacation almost every year of his life, except when prevented by war or illness. He invariably visited the counties of Antrim, Derry, Down (his favourite), and Donegal—all within the province of Ulster, in its classic sense. At one point, Lewis even considered permanently renting a cottage in Cloghy, County Down,<sup>15</sup> as the base for his annual walking holidays, which often included strenuous hikes in the Mountains of Mourne. (In the end, he decided that his finances would not stretch to this luxury.) Although Lewis worked in England, his heart was firmly fixed in the northern counties of Ireland, especially County Down. As he once remarked to his Irish student David Bleakley, “Heaven is Oxford lifted and placed in the middle of County Down.”<sup>16</sup>

Where some Irish writers found their literary inspiration in the political and cultural issues surrounding their nation’s quest for independence from Great Britain, Lewis found his primarily in the landscapes of Ireland. These, he declared, had inspired and shaped the prose and poetry of many before him—perhaps most important, Edmund Spenser’s classic *The Faerie Queene*, an Elizabethan work that Lewis regularly expounded in his lectures at Oxford and Cambridge. For Lewis, this classic work of “quests and wanderings and inextinguishable desires” clearly reflected Spenser’s many years spent in Ireland. Who could fail to detect “the soft, wet air, the loneliness, the muffled shapes of the hills” or “the heart-rending sunsets” of Ireland? For Lewis—who here identifies himself as someone who actually is “an Irishman”—Spenser’s subsequent period in England led to a loss of his imaginative power. “The many years in Ireland lie behind Spenser’s greatest poetry, and the few years in England behind his minor poetry.”<sup>17</sup>

Lewis’s language echoes his origins. In his correspondence, Lewis regularly uses Anglo-Irish idioms or slang derived from Gaelic, without offering a translation or explanation—for example, the phrases to “make a poor mouth” (from the Gaelic *an béal bocht*, meaning “to complain of poverty”), or “whisht, now!” (meaning “be quiet,” derived from the Gaelic *bí i do thost*). Other idioms reflect local idiosyncrasies, rather than Gaelic linguistic provenance, such as the curious phrase “as long as a Lurgan spade” (meaning “looking gloomy” or “having a long face”).<sup>18</sup> Although



Lewis's voice in his "broadcast talks" of the 1940s is typical of the Oxford academic culture of his day, his pronunciation of words such as *friend*, *hour*, and *again* betrays the subtle influence of his Belfast roots.

So why is Lewis not celebrated as one of the greatest Irish writers of all time? Why is there no entry for "Lewis, C. S." in the 1,472 pages of the supposedly definitive *Dictionary of Irish Literature* (1996)? The real issue is that Lewis does not fit—and, indeed, must be said partly to have *chosen* not to fit—the template of Irish identity that has dominated the late twentieth century. In some ways, Lewis represents precisely the forces and influences which the advocates of a stereotypical Irish literary identity wished to reject. If Dublin stood at the centre of the demands for Home Rule and the reassertion of Irish culture in the early twentieth century, Lewis's home city of Belfast was the heart of opposition to any such developments.

One of the reasons why Ireland has largely chosen to forget about Lewis is that he was the wrong kind of Irishman. In 1917, Lewis certainly saw himself as sympathetic to the "New Ireland School," and was considering sending his poetry to Maunsel and Roberts,<sup>19</sup> a Dublin publisher with strong links to Irish nationalism, having published the collected works of the great nationalist writer Patrick Pearse (1879–1916) that same year. Conceding that they were "only a second-rate house," Lewis expressed the hope that this might mean they would take his submission seriously.<sup>20</sup>

Yet a year later, things seemed very different to Lewis. Writing to his longtime friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis expressed his fear that the New Ireland School would end up as little more than "a sort of little by-way of the intellectual world, off the main track." Lewis now recognised the importance of keeping "in the broad highway of thought," writing for a broad readership rather than one narrowly defined by certain cultural and political agendas. To be published by Maunsel would, Lewis declared, be tantamount to associating himself with what was little more than a "cult." His Irish identity, inspired by Ireland's landscape rather than its political history, would find its expression in the literary mainstream, not one of its "side-tracks."<sup>21</sup> Lewis may have chosen to

rise above the provinciality of Irish literature; he nevertheless remains one of its most luminous and famous representatives.

### **SURROUNDED BY BOOKS: HINTS OF A LITERARY VOCATION**

The physical landscape of Ireland was unquestionably one of the influences that shaped Lewis's fertile imagination. Yet there is another source which did much to inspire his youthful outlook—literature itself. One of Lewis's most persistent memories of his youth is that of a home packed with books. Albert Lewis might have worked as a police solicitor to earn his keep, but his heart lay in the reading of literature.

In April 1905, the Lewis family moved to a new and more spacious home that had just been constructed on the outskirts of the city of Belfast—"Leeborough House" on the Circular Road in Strandtown, known more informally as "Little Lea" or "Leaboro." The Lewis brothers were free to roam this vast house, and allowed their imaginations to transform it into mysterious kingdoms and strange lands. Both brothers inhabited imaginary worlds, and committed something of these to writing. Lewis wrote about talking animals in "Animal-Land," while Warnie wrote about "India" (later combined into the equally imaginary land of Boxen).

As Lewis later recalled, wherever he looked in this new house, he saw stacks, piles, and shelves of books.<sup>22</sup> On many rainy days, he found solace and company in reading these works and roaming freely across imagined literary landscapes. The books so liberally scattered throughout the "New House" included works of romance and mythology, which opened the windows of Lewis's young imagination. The physical landscape of County Down was seen through a literary lens, becoming a gateway to distant realms. Warren Lewis later reflected on the imaginative stimulus offered to him and his brother by wet weather and a sense of longing for something more satisfying.<sup>23</sup> Might his brother's imaginative wanderings have been prompted by his childhood "staring out to unattainable hills," seen through rain and under grey skies?



**1.3** The Lewis family at Little Lea in 1905. *Back Row* (left to right): Agnes Lewis (aunt), two maids, Flora Lewis (mother). *Front Row* (left to right): Warnie, C. S. Lewis, Leonard Lewis (cousin), Eileen Lewis (cousin), and Albert Lewis (father), holding Nero (dog).

Ireland is the “Emerald Isle” precisely on account of its high levels of rainfall and mist, which ensure moist soils and lush green grass. It was natural for Lewis to later transfer this sense of confinement by rain to four young children, trapped in an elderly professor’s house, unable to explore outside because of a “steady rain falling, so thick that when you looked out of the window you could see neither the mountains nor the woods nor even the stream in the garden.”<sup>24</sup> Is the professor’s house in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* modelled on Leeborough?

From Little Lea, the young Lewis could see the distant Castlereagh Hills, which seemed to speak to him of something of heartrending significance, lying tantalizingly beyond his reach. They became a symbol of liminality, of standing on the threshold of a new, deeper, and more satisfying way of thinking and living. An unutterable sense of intense longing arose within him as he contemplated them. He could not say exactly *what* it

was that he longed for, merely that there was a sense of emptiness within him, which the mysterious hills seemed to heighten without satisfying. In *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), these hills reappear as a symbol of the heart's unknown desire. But if Lewis was standing on the threshold of something wondrous and enticing, how could he enter this mysterious realm? Who would open the door and allow him through? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the image of a door became increasingly significant to Lewis's later reflections on the deeper questions of life.

The low, green line of the Castlereagh Hills, though actually quite close, thus came to be a symbol of something distant and unattainable. These hills were, for Lewis, distant objects of desire, marking the end of his known world, from which the whisper of the haunting "horns of elf-land" could be heard. "They taught me longing—*Sehnsucht*; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower."<sup>25</sup>

We must linger over this statement. What does Lewis mean by *Sehnsucht*? The German word is rich with emotional and imaginative associations, famously described by the poet Matthew Arnold as a "wistful, soft, tearful longing." And what of the "Blue Flower"? Leading German Romantic writers, such as Novalis (1772–1801) and Joseph von Eichendorff (1788–1857), used the image of a "Blue Flower" as a symbol of the wanderings and yearnings of the human soul, especially as this sense of longing is evoked—though not satisfied—by the natural world.

Even at this early stage, then, Lewis was probing and questioning the limits of his world. What lay beyond its horizons? Yet Lewis could not answer the questions that these longings so provocatively raised in his youthful mind. To what did they point? Was there a doorway? And if so, where was it to be found? And what did it lead to? Finding answers to these questions would preoccupy Lewis for the next twenty-five years.

## **SOLITUDE: WARNIE GOES TO ENGLAND**

Everything we know about Lewis around 1905 suggests a lonely, introverted boy with hardly any friends, who found pleasure and fulfilment in

the solitary reading of books. Why solitary? Having secured a new house for his family, Albert Lewis now turned his attention to ensuring the future prospects of his sons. As a pillar of the Protestant establishment in Belfast, Albert Lewis took the view that the interests of his sons would be best advanced by sending the boys to boarding school in England. Albert's brother William had already sent his son to an English school, seeing this as an acceptable route to social advancement. Albert decided to do the same, and took professional advice about which school would best suit his needs.

The London educational agents Gabbitas & Thring had been founded in 1873 to recruit suitable schoolmasters for leading English schools and provide guidance for parents wanting to secure the best possible education for their children. Schoolmasters whom they helped to find suitable positions included such future stars—now, it must be said, not chiefly remembered for having ever been schoolmasters—as W. H. Auden, John Betjeman, Edward Elgar, Evelyn Waugh, and H. G. Wells. By 1923, when the firm celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its founding, over 120,000 teaching vacancies had been negotiated and no fewer than 50,000 parents had sought their counsel on the best school for their children. This included Albert Lewis, who asked their advice on where to send his elder son, Warren.

Their recommendation duly came through. It turned out to be stunningly bad advice. In May 1905, without making the more critical and thorough inquiries some would have expected of a man in his position, Albert Lewis packed the nine-year-old Warren off to Wynyard School in Watford, north of London. It was perhaps the first of many mistakes that Lewis's father would make concerning his relationship with his sons.

Jacks—as Lewis now preferred to be called—and his brother, Warnie, had lived together in Little Lea for only a month, sharing a “Little End Room” in the top floor of the rambling house as their haven. Now, they were separated. C. S. Lewis remained at home, and was taught privately by his mother and a governess, Annie Harper. But perhaps his best teachers were the burgeoning stacks of books, none of which were forbidden to him.

For two years, the solitary Lewis roamed the large house's long, creaking corridors and roomy attics, with vast quantities of books as his companions.

Lewis's inner world began to take shape. Where other boys of his age were playing games on the streets or in the countryside around Belfast, Lewis constructed, inhabited, and explored his own private worlds. He was forced to become a loner—something that unquestionably catalysed his imaginative life. In Warnie's absence, he had nobody as a soul mate with whom he could share his dreams and longings. The school vacations became of supreme importance to him. They were when Warnie came home.

### FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH JOY

At some point around this time, Lewis's already rich imaginative life took a new turn. Lewis later recalled three early experiences which he regarded as shaping one of his life's chief concerns. The first of these took place when the fragrance of a "flowering currant bush" in the garden at Little Lea triggered a memory of his time in the "Old House"—Dundela Villas, which Albert Lewis had then rented from a relative.<sup>26</sup> Lewis speaks of experiencing a transitory, delectable sense of desire, which overwhelmed him. Before he had worked out what was happening, the experience had passed, leaving him "longing for the longing that had just ceased." It seemed to Lewis to be of enormous importance. "Everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison." But what did it mean?

The second experience came when reading Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin* (1903). Though Lewis admired Potter's books in general at this time, something about this work sparked an intense longing for something he clearly struggled to describe—"the Idea of Autumn."<sup>27</sup> Once more, Lewis experienced the same intoxicating sense of "intense desire."

The third came when he read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's translation of a few lines from the Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846):<sup>28</sup>

*I heard a voice that cried,  
Balder the beautiful  
Is dead, is dead—*

Lewis found the impact of these words devastating. It was as if they opened a door that he did not know existed, allowing him to see a new realm beyond his own experience, which he longed to enter and possess. For a moment, nothing else seemed to matter. "I knew nothing of Balder," he recalled, "but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, [and] I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote)."<sup>29</sup> Yet even before Lewis had realised what was happening to him, the experience passed, and left him longing to be able to reenter it.

Looking back on these three experiences, Lewis understood that they could be seen as aspects or manifestations of the same thing: "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy."<sup>30</sup> The quest for that Joy would become a central theme of Lewis's life and writing.

So how are we to make sense of these experiences, which played such a significant role in Lewis's development, especially the shaping of his "inner life"? Perhaps we can draw on the classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), in which the Harvard psychologist William James (1842-1910) tried to make sense of the complex, powerful experiences that lay at the heart of the lives of so many religious thinkers. Drawing extensively on a wide range of published writings and personal testimonies, James identified four characteristic features of such experiences.<sup>31</sup> In the first place, such experiences are "ineffable." They defy expression, and cannot be described adequately in words.

In the second place, James suggests that those who experience them achieve "insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect." In other words, they are experienced as "illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance." They evoke an "enormous sense of inner authority and illumination," transfiguring the understanding of those who experience them, often evoking a deep sense "of being revelations of new depths of truth." These themes clearly underlie Lewis's early descriptions of "Joy," such as his statement that "everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison."



Third, James goes on to emphasise that these experiences are transient; they “cannot be sustained for long.” Usually they last from a few seconds to just minutes, and their quality cannot be accurately remembered, though the experience is recognised if it recurs. “When faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory.” This aspect of James’s typology of religious experience is clearly reflected in Lewis’s prose.

Finally, James suggests that those who have had such an experience feel as if they have been “grasped and held by a superior power.” Such experiences are not created by active subjects; they come upon people, often with overwhelming power.

Lewis’s eloquent descriptions of his experience of “Joy” clearly fit into James’s characterisation. Lewis’s experiences were perceived as deeply meaningful, throwing open the doors of another world, which then shut almost immediately, leaving him exhilarated at what had happened, yet longing to recover it. They are like momentary and transient epiphanies, when things suddenly seem to come acutely and sharply into focus, only for the light to fade and the vision to recede, leaving nothing but a memory and a longing.

Lewis was left with a sense of loss, even of betrayal, in the aftermath of such experiences. Yet as frustrating and disconcerting as they may have been, they suggested to him that the visible world might be only a curtain that concealed vast, uncharted realms of mysterious oceans and islands. It was an idea that, once planted, never lost its imaginative appeal or its emotional power. Yet, as we shall see, Lewis would soon come to believe it was illusory, a childhood dream which the dawning of adult rationality exposed as a cruel delusion. Ideas of a transcendent realm or of a God might be “lies breathed through silver,”<sup>32</sup> but they remained lies nevertheless.

## THE DEATH OF FLORA LEWIS

Edward VII came to the English throne after the death of Victoria in 1901 and reigned until 1910. The Edwardian Age is now often seen as a golden period of long summer afternoons and elegant garden parties, an image which was shattered by the Great War of 1914–1918. While this highly

romanticised view of the Edwardian Age largely reflects the postwar nostalgia of the 1920s, there is no doubt that many at the time saw it as a settled and secure age. There were troubling developments afoot—above all, the growing military and industrial power of Germany and the economic strength of the United States, which some realised posed significant threats to British imperial interests. Yet the dominant mood was that of an empire which was settled and strong, its trade routes protected by the greatest navy the world had ever known.

This sense of stability is evident in Lewis's early childhood. In May 1907, Lewis wrote to Warnie, telling him that it was nearly settled that they were going to spend part of their holidays in France. Going abroad was a significant departure for the Lewis family, who normally spent up to six weeks during the summer at northern Irish resorts such as Castlerock or Portrush. Their father, preoccupied with his legal practice, was often an intermittent presence on these occasions. As things turned out, he would not join them in France at all.



1.4 Pension le Petit Vallon, Berneval-le-Grand, Pas-de-Calais, France. Postcard dating from around 1905.

In the event, Lewis enjoyed an intimate and tranquil holiday with his brother and mother. On 20 August 1907, Flora Lewis took her two sons to the Pension le Petit Vallon, a family hotel in the small town of Berneval-le-Grand in Normandy, not far from Dieppe, where they would remain until 18 September. A picture postcard of the early 1900s perhaps helps us understand Flora's choice: the reassuring words "English spoken" feature prominently above a photograph of Edwardian families relaxing happily on its grounds. Any hopes that Lewis had of learning some French were dashed when he discovered that all the other guests were English.

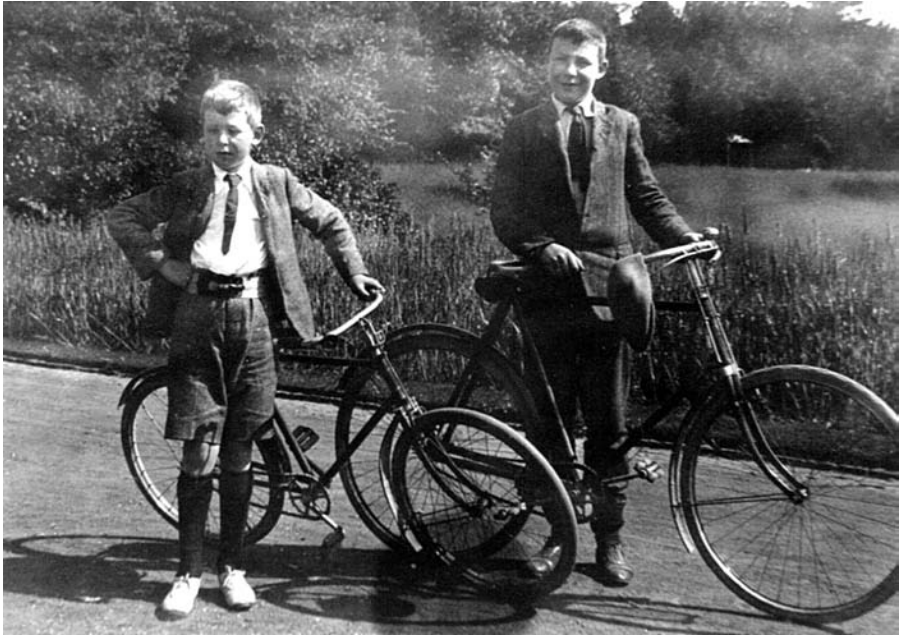
It was to be an idyllic summer of the late Edwardian period, with no hints of the horrors to come. When hospitalised in France during the Great War a mere eighteen miles (29 kilometres) east of Berneval-le-Grand, Lewis found himself wistfully recalling those precious, lost golden days.<sup>33</sup> Nobody had foreseen the political possibility of such a war, nor the destruction it would wreak—just as nobody in the Lewis family could have known that this would be the last holiday they would spend together. A year later, Flora Lewis was dead.

Early in 1908, it became clear that Flora was seriously ill. She had developed abdominal cancer. Albert Lewis asked his father, Richard, who had been living in Little Lea for some months, to move out. They needed the space for the nurses who would attend Flora. It was too much for Richard Lewis. He suffered a stroke in late March, and died the following month.

When it became clear that Flora was in terminal decline, Warnie was summoned home from school in England to be with his mother in her final weeks. Their mother's illness brought the Lewis brothers even closer together. One of the most touching photographs of this period shows Warnie and C. S. Lewis standing by their bicycles, outside Glenmachan House, close to Little Lea, early in August 1908. Lewis's world was about to change, drastically and irreversibly.

Flora died in her bed at home on 23 August 1908—Albert Lewis's forty-fifth birthday. The somewhat funereal quotation for that day on her

bedroom calendar was from Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "Men must endure their going hence." For the rest of Albert Lewis's life, Warnie later discovered, the calendar remained open at that page.<sup>34</sup>



**1.5** Lewis and Warnie with their bicycles in front of the Ewart family home, Glenmachan House, in August 1908.

Following the custom of the day, Lewis was obliged to view the dead body of his mother lying in an open coffin, the gruesome marks of her illness all too visible. It was a traumatic experience for him. "With my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life."<sup>35</sup>

In *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory Kirke's mother is lovingly described on her deathbed, in terms that seem to echo Lewis's haunting memories of Flora: "There she lay, as he had seen her lie so many other times, propped up on the pillows, with a thin, pale face that would make you cry to look at."<sup>36</sup> There is little doubt that this passage recalls Lewis's own distress at the death of his mother, especially the sight of her emaciated

body in an open coffin. In allowing Digory's mother to be cured of her terminal illness by the magic apple from Narnia, Lewis seems to be healing his own deep emotional wounds with an imaginative balm, trying to deal with what really happened by imagining what might have happened.

While Lewis was clearly distressed at his mother's death, his memories of this dark period often focus more on its broader implications for his family. As Albert Lewis tried to come to terms with his wife's illness, he seems to have lost an awareness of the deeper needs of his sons. C. S. Lewis depicts this period as heralding the end of his family life, as the seeds of alienation were sown. Having lost his wife, Albert Lewis was in danger of losing his sons as well.<sup>37</sup> Two weeks after Flora's death, Albert's elder brother, Joseph, died. The Lewis family, it seemed, was in crisis. The father and his two sons were on their own. "It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis."<sup>38</sup>

This could have been a time for the rebuilding of paternal affection and rekindling of filial devotion. Nothing of the sort happened. That Albert's judgement failed him at this critical time is made abundantly clear in his decision concerning the future of his sons at this crisis in their young lives. A mere two weeks after the traumatic death of his mother, C. S. Lewis found himself standing on the Belfast quayside with Warnie, preparing to board the overnight steamer to the Lancashire port of Fleetwood. An emotionally unintelligent father bade his emotionally neglected sons an emotionally inadequate farewell. Everything that gave the young Lewis his security and identity seemed to be vanishing around him. Lewis was being sent away from Ireland—from his home and from his books—to a strange place where he would live among strangers, with his brother, Warnie, as his only companion. He was being sent to Wynyard School—the "Belsen" of *Surprised by Joy*.