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BOOK REVIEW

Alister McGrath. *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013. xvi + 431 pp. Hbk. ISBN 1414382529.

C. S. Lewis, author and literary critic who taught at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, is known internationally for his enduring work of children's fiction, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, among other works. Within the evangelical camp he functions as a patron saint of sorts, who writes beautifully and elegantly on the nature of Christian experience and within the realm of Christian apologetics. Even now, half a century after his death, his impact shows no sign of waning, especially considering Disney's work in putting the Narnia books to film for a new generation.

Many biographies outlining Lewis's life and work have been written, even by individuals who personally knew "Jack," and although these books are worth reading, they typically seem to fall into two categories. The first is that of hagiography, where Lewis is portrayed as a venerable saint with little or no struggle with doubt, fear, or failure. The other is revisionist, where biographers challenge this view, and the end product is a Lewis who apparently abandoned his faith towards the end of his life in the face of grief and hardship.

Alister McGrath, himself an Oxford Research Fellow, wades into Lewis studies and offers a significant contribution with a fresh perspective and some new insights. In the end, he provides readers with a multi-dimensional, complex portrait of Lewis that at once does away with the aforementioned "saintly" views, yet affirms that there was something unique and significant about the man who resided at "the Kilns." Because McGrath, like most biographers, progresses chronologically through Lewis's life, a

summary in this review of the contents and chapters may not prove as useful as noting McGrath's new insights and notes. Hence, I will proceed in the latter vein.

McGrath gives more attention to Lewis's relationship to his father than do other biographers. He has scoured the primary sources (something Lewis himself would have appreciated, no doubt), including the incredible number of personal correspondences and letters sent and received by family, friends, and colleagues of Lewis. While tediously exploring these sources, he does not shy away from some of Lewis's atrocious actions and lies to his father. Nor does he gloss over some of Lewis's sexual perversions and interests earlier in his life. The biography spends a good deal of time focusing on the early education of Lewis, which he himself returned to in his writings with surprisingly negative language. What is notable about McGrath's treatment of Lewis's early life is that he is absolutely meticulous with dates, locations, and individuals. When he disagrees with other biographers he is quick to mention it, and his sourcing and end-notes, though rather extensive, are at no points cumbersome.

McGrath delves into some of the tension existing in Ireland at the time of Lewis's youth and offers an assessment of Lewis's conflicting emotions towards his homeland. This is enlightening because it is too easy for readers, and even biographers, to view Lewis as "British," forgetting his Irish heritage. Additionally, the author highlights Lewis's experiences in the Great War and his time at Oxford before, after, and during his enlistment.

One continuous theme in the book is Lewis's deep friendship with Arthur Greeves, who, according to McGrath, likely had rather strong romantic feelings for Lewis. Again, McGrath does not shy away from the odd relationship that developed between Lewis and the infamous Mrs. Moore, arguing that although the exact details of this relationship cannot be known, it was complex and likely featured a romantic element in its early stages. This romantic element, it should be noted, is still debatable in Lewis studies.

One of the most intriguing aspects of McGrath's new biography is the date that he assigns to Lewis's conversion to theism. While most biographers, and in fact Lewis himself, date this

significant change in thinking to around April–June of 1929, McGrath argues rather convincingly for the period March–June of 1930. A biographer obviously must have sufficient warrant for going against the testimony of the subject himself, but in this case McGrath’s bold synthesis of the information seems well founded. Arguing from personal correspondence of Lewis and his family, and after critically evaluating the records that Lewis penned years later (for example, Lewis notes certain types of flowers in bloom around the time of his conversion that are only found in the English countryside during the dates that McGrath proposes), the hypothesis makes sense. Coupled with Lewis’s reputation for having a horrible memory when it came to dates and times, McGrath’s new proposal will be sure to be a new conversation piece in Lewis studies.

McGrath critically engages with Lewis’s academic life, publications, lecture series, awards, and career. Lewis’s relationship and interaction with J. R. R. Tolkien is well developed in the book, relying upon primary documents as the source of information. Most of Lewis’s major works are examined in some way or another, with longer portions being devoted to *The Problem of Pain* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In his evaluation of Lewis’s popular works, McGrath is both critical and charitable, exposing weak lines in Lewis’s argumentation, yet charitable in that he does not commit the error of anachronism in expecting Lewis to be a generation ahead of his time regarding his sensitivities regarding the roles of women and other such issues.

McGrath offers an objective, fair, and multi-faceted image of Lewis. The biography is clearly written, does not belabour points of little consequence, and interacts with Lewis and his work in a deep and serious manner. McGrath is not a revisionist, and so presents a Lewis who was miraculously changed in his conversion and who lived a life of Christian virtue to the best of his ability. What comes about in the end is not the image of an impeccable man, nor of a man who was disingenuous or hypocritical. The final chapter in the biography, which reflects on Lewis’s legacy and the reason for his enduring impact on later generations, gives both a sense of continuity with the modern world and closure for the story of Lewis’s life. Even now, half a

century after his death or, in Lewis's words, his "waking from the shadow lands," the man continues to exert influence on this generation and McGrath's new biography is a welcome contribution to Lewis studies.

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