

## THE WORLDWIDE CULT OF LEWIS: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Stephen PRICKETT

*University of Glasgow,  
Honorary Professor, University of Kent*

In November 1963 I had just begun teaching English in a boys' boarding school in the hinterland of Eastern Nigeria. On the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup> I was talking to the friend with whom I shared a house on the edge of the campus. David had been in Nigeria for longer than I, and knew the country much better. He suddenly broke off, and held up his hand.

"Hear those drums in the village," he said? "Those are funeral drums. It sounds like someone important has died."

"Would that be a local chief or Headman?" I suggested.

"No," he said. "I think this is someone *really* important. You don't often hear them like this. Could be someone of national significance. Let's put the radio on and get the news."

And that, of course, is how I heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas. When you think that was at 12.30 pm US Central Standard Time, seven hours behind us on West Africa Standard Time, short wave radio meant that the jungle drums were remarkably quick to pick up the news.

What we did not hear for some weeks was that two other relatively famous figures had also died that day: the novelist, Aldous Huxley, and the popular academic author, C.S. Lewis. Of those three, Lewis, my old English professor from Cambridge, though widely known for his popular religious writings, would probably have been rated the least important of the three in the greater scheme of things. The Narnia books had appeared too late for me to read them as a child, and I first came across them for the first time during that African stay. I was not to know then that within fifty years they were to sell over 100 million copies in no less than 47 languages.

The first indication I had of Lewis's international appeal came during the ten years I spent teaching English at the Australian National University in

Canberra. I was contacted by an ‘Inklings’ group in Brisbane, Queensland, inviting me to speak at a conference there. It was led by a an intelligent, but somewhat eccentric mature student called Kath Filmer, and I remember being surprised that the fame of that group of Oxford friends had spread to the far side of the world. On my return to the UK—to a Chair in Glasgow—I came into contact with another Inklings Society, this time in Cologne, in Germany, led by another powerful woman, Adelheide Kegler. I might still have dismissed both as being fringe movements, when I was approached by a group from France. Now, as you well know, the French are not inclined easily to fall for people or ideas outside the Francophone world. So it was something of a surprise to meet a third powerful woman, Solange Dyras, and, through her, Professor Jacques Sys. Sys was certainly no marginal eccentric: a member of the Collège de France, and a former visiting fellow of All Soul’s College, Oxford. He was one of the most brilliant academics it has ever been my good fortune to encounter. I once chaired a lecture by him where I was—as so often—dazzled by his beautifully organized English prose style. Then, because I was sitting beside him, I happened to glance at the written text he was reading from. It was in French! In other words he was not merely giving a complicated argument in a second language, he was *also* practising simultaneous translation.

I once asked him what he had done for his Ph.D. He replied that it had been on C.S. Lewis. I must have looked surprised, because he then smiled, and said “Stephen, I’m not sure you realise that Lewis will probably be remembered as the most important British academic figure of the twentieth century.” My mind flicked quickly over other significant names from literature, history or science: Crick and Watson, Paul Dirac, Stephen Hawking, Trevor Roper, Ernest Rutherford, Basil Willey, ... There are many eminent figures, and perhaps the jury is still out, but here I am invited to talk to you in Romania today about this same professor of English. My mind flicks also back to those 100 million copies of the Narnia stories. I doubt if any of these others, however notable their Nobel Prizes, can command a readership of anything near that scale.

There are, of course, now far more Lewis, Inklings or Mythopoeic Societies, scattered around the world: in Argentina, India, Japan, Nigeria, Russia, Taiwan, and almost every country you can think of. And I have not yet even mentioned the USA, where there are a multitude of such societies. An article published in *Christianity Today* described Lewis as “the Aquinas, the Augustine, and the Aesop of contemporary evangelicalism.” (Lewis would probably have been horrified!) We probably know of the Wade Centre, at Wheaton College, and its main scholarly publication: *Seven*, devoted to the work of George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis. If you don’t know it, I recommend it to you. (Personal disclosure: I am a member of its Advisory Board.) In the early years of this century I taught for five years at Baylor

University, in Texas, where they had a special unit for ‘Teaching and Learning’ whose patron saint—if I may use such a Catholic metaphor in an Evangelical Protestant institution—was, of course, Clive Staples Lewis, whose works were thrust upon you everywhere you turned. I could refer to the Narnia stories, or Screwtape in my classes, confident that every student would recognise what I was talking about. In May of this year, I was in Indiana for a conference on Lewis, with well over a hundred delegates. There was at least one globe trotting person there who is here somewhere today.

And let us not forget names. Lewis belongs to that select company of writers who have changed the vocabulary not merely of the English language, but of the world – or, at least of the 47 or more languages into which those stories have been translated. As many of you will know, Narnia is actually a hill city of about 20,000 people in Umbria, Italy. How they first found out that their city name had been hi-jacked as a kind of mythical other-world by an imaginative English professor, I don’t know. But they have certainly learned to like it. After all, it is a tourist office’s dream. As you approach the city you are greeted by a large notice—in English, naturally – telling the traveller that you are now entering C.S. Lewis’s Narnia.

To go back to that fateful November day in 1963, and the outcome of those three unconnected deaths. Kennedy, of course, is now a name in history—a figure to be discussed by historians, but, as we all know, of little relevance to Donald Trump’s America. There is indeed an Aldous Huxley Society, but it is located in Germany, and, despite the popularity of such novels as *Brave New World*, nothing suggests to me that his world-wide reputation has increased significantly. So, what, we may ask, might account for the extraordinary and growing significance of Lewis, which can now fairly be said to have comprehensively overshadowed his two unlikely companions in death?

The first reason is that Lewis wrote as he spoke, in an unfashionably clear and simple English. As one who attended his lectures as a student, I can witness to this clarity. He was easy to understand, even when he was dealing with difficult topics. I imagine this makes his writing a gift to translators.

Here let me digress for a moment to mention Romania. As Lewis’s translator, Professor Rodica Albu tells me it all began in the late ‘80s, when one of her students, now her colleague, Teodora Ghiviriga, entered the classroom with glittering eyes and a little book in her hand. It was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which she had found in the British Council Library in Bucharest and had read with tremendous enthusiasm. Professor Albu borrowed it for a few days, “bribed” the person who had access to the only copy machine in the university printing press—one of the few copy machines in Iasi—and thus managed to have her own copy, which she read in “episodes” to her little daughter every evening. Though she began reading it simply as a bed-time story to her child, she rapidly realised that this might be something more: that she

could tackle it from a particular angle—narrative, mythical, social, psychological or stylistic—or as an instance of Fantasy Fiction; and she could as well approach it from a theological or a moral perspective. But above all, to her great surprise, that story of Narnia also seemed to be about her own country. “It was clearly all about Romania!” she exclaimed to me. “There was the snow, the secret police, the informers, the wicked witch—Madam Ceausescu...” She began the Romanian translation that very first evening, but was only able to see it published in 1993. While I am not sure that Lewis had Romania specifically in mind when he wrote that first Narnia story, the whole story reveals brilliantly both the unpredictability and universal appeal of his writing.

Allied with his almost unparalleled power of exposition, is Lewis’s openly centrist theology. His theological thinking is almost exclusively mainstream. He deliberately followed the Vincentian Canon: what all Christians have at all times and in all places believed. *Mere Christianity* is mainstream in every sense. In other words, he did not speak for any particular denominational faction. As far as possible, he spoke for the whole Church. “You will not learn from me,” he once wrote, “whether you ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic.” In fact, Catholics in the ‘60s had been actively discouraged from reading Protestant theological writers, but once Tolkien, a devout Catholic, had become popular, Lewis, as a fellow-Inkling, followed naturally. An outside observer might have found it quite difficult to work out that Lewis was in fact a middle-of-the-road Anglican.

Perhaps for this reason he has been adopted as a spokesman by legions of American Evangelicals—who have often lacked what they felt to be an articulate spokesperson. To begin with, Lewis had been regarded with some suspicion in the 1960s—Alister McGrath, his most recent biographer, cites one critic who wrote: “C.S. Lewis was an imposter, who corrupted the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and led multitudes of victims into Hellfire with his doctrines of devils. Lewis used profanities, told lewd stories, and frequently got drunk with his students.” (McGrath, p. 375)

So much for those convivial gatherings of the Inklings in the *Eagle and Child!* Nevertheless, by the ‘80s and ‘90s he was probably more read among evangelicals than any other figure. *Mere Christianity*, has become a best-seller among his non-fiction titles. I have already mentioned that at Baylor Lewis was frequently held up as the embodiment of the Christian teacher. But this was always a selective reading of Lewis.

I recall a particular moment in my first year at Cambridge. I had heard of Lewis before I went to university, but the only thing I had read by him was *The Screwtape Letters*, and I had this mental picture of him as looking very much like I had imagined Screwtape himself—tall and distinguished, with black hair, a long thin face, with a small black pointed beard—and dressed entirely in black, rather like an austere sixteenth-century Spanish courtier, or, not unconnectedly,

more or less like the Devil himself. My shock when this jolly-looking, rather stout and florid character in an old tweed jacket, walking stiffly with the aid of a stick, entered our first-year lecture theatre was all the greater. The Devil had turned into a jovial farmer. His lectures were not particularly jovial, I have to add, nor were they saturnine—nor, unlike many lecturers, were they remotely self-indulgent. They began at ten past the hour and finished at precisely ten to the hour. Forty minutes was quite enough for any lecture, he explained. They were precise, thorough, clear and well-delivered. So matter-of-fact was he in general that it was a complete shock when one day—somewhere about the middle of November 1958—he said something extraordinary.

“I want to say something about myself,” he began. “I have been accused of being a Christian, and filling my lectures with Christian propaganda. It is perfectly true that I am a Christian—but I strongly deny that it has made any difference to my teaching. There is good teaching and there is bad teaching. I hope I have always been a good teacher. Be that as it may, it is a verifiable fact that I did not alter my mode of teaching in any way when I became a Christian. Though I have written Christian apologetic, the Cambridge English Faculty is not the place for it. I talk about religion in my lectures because they are about mediaeval literature, and mediaeval literature is all about religion. As a teacher, however, whether I am a Christian or an atheist should make no difference at all.”

Behind this is another important feature of Lewis’s thinking. He believed in a kind of universal morality—common to all people of whatever faith everywhere. He sometimes called it ‘The Way’. The morality of the Ten Commandments—thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not bear false witness etc.—was, he believed, more or less common to all civilized religious societies, Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, Muslim, or Zoroastrian. As far as possible, he tried to free his religion from any Western imperial accretions. In his science fiction book, *Out of the Silent Planet*, such assumptions make a rich source of comedy. But what one might call this practical universalism has always helped to make his thinking potentially more accessible to non-Western societies right across the Globe.

None of these factors, however, important as they all have been, would be sufficient in themselves to account for this worldwide popularity. There are others who have possessed all these gifts. But for him, they are, as it were, the lubricant, the vehicle for spreading something else that marks him out as being unique. This was his capacity to create new myths. Again, this in itself was hardly unique. It was something the other Inklings also had in abundance. One only has to think of Tolkien or Williams, both great mythopoeic creators. What Lewis could do was something subtly different. He could make new myths out of old ones. He could take the great myths of the past, and reshape them, adapt, even modernise them, to create new and even more vital myths. The Narnia

stories are a composite, an amalgam of other mythologies taken from Lewis's enormous reading. In addition to multiple sources in classical literature, which are everywhere present, we have the Norse sagas behind *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, we have E. Nesbit behind *The Magician's Nephew*, and Lewis's talking animals seem to have stepped out of *The Wind in the Willows*. Almost every one of his most brilliant creations is taken from another source, dusted down, and re-used in what appears to be a seamless new creation. One of my favourite discoveries was when I realised that the lamp-post in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, was lifted complete from a little-known Kipling short story, *The Brushwood Boy*. But here's my point, Lewis does it *better* than Kipling. He saw the potential in such an extraordinary image, and was able to turn it into an even more mysterious and symbolic object—a light shining forever in the darkness. Indeed, if we are to recall his own account of the origins of the entire Narnia saga—and I use the word in its proper sense—it all started with a mental picture of a lamp-post and a faun carrying parcels through the snow.

But, of course, there was another myth even behind and beyond that one. His use of the Christian myth—and again, I use that word in its proper sense of a narrative charged with hidden meaning—in the sacrifice of Aslan, has drawn some justified criticism. But this is not a theological disquisition. What I am trying to analyse is his truly astonishing capacity to bring together the whole tradition of European literature into a single apparently seamless story for children, and charge it with almost illimitable depths of meaning. His actual children are somewhat wooden figures, who speak a strange stilted English—which, I suspect, comes across better in translation than in the original. Nevertheless, a child who reads the seven Narnia books has been introduced, unknowingly, to almost the whole of European literature and theology: though it may take that same child almost a lifetime to recognise what it has learned—and I use 'recognise' in its Platonic sense. We cannot account for genius, only admire it when, as sometimes happens, it bursts unexpectedly into view. Perhaps those jungle drums in Nigeria were relaying a message whose full significance neither they, nor I, could then fully understand.

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**Stephen Prickett** is Regius Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Glasgow, and an Honorary Professor of the University of Kent, at Canterbury. He took his BA and PhD at Cambridge (Trinity Hall) and a Dip. Ed. at Oxford (University College) before teaching in Nigeria from 1963-5. From 1967 to 1982 he taught at the University of Sussex, before moving to the Chair of English at the Australian National University in Canberra (1983-89). He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, former Chairman of the U.K. Higher Education Foundation, former President of the European Society for the Study of Literature and Theology, President of the George MacDonald Society, Fellow of the English Association, and holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Artois, France, and a honorary doctorate from the University of Bucharest, Romania. His publications include one novel, nine monographs, seven edited volumes, and over ninety articles on Romanticism, Victorian Studies and related topics, especially on literature and theology. He is also general editor of a new Reader in European Romanticism, a multi-lingual project involving 18 universities in 15 countries, which was published by Continuum in 2010.  
*Email:* [stephenprickett@stephenprickett.co.uk](mailto:stephenprickett@stephenprickett.co.uk)

